The Dynamics of Digital Influence: Communication Trends in Business, Politics and Activism
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Communication Trends in Business, Politics and Activism

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Navigating the Pulse of Modern Communication

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In the fast-paced digital age, the landscape of strategic communication is undergoing a profound transformation. The convergence of technology, media, and public discourse has created a dynamic environment where traditional communication methods are being constantly redefined. "The Dynamics of Digital Influence: Communication Trends in Business, Politics and Activism" seeks to explore this ever-evolving terrain, offering a window into the current and future trends that are reshaping the way we communicate. The advent of digital platforms has democratized information dissemination, enabling voices from all corners of the world to participate in the global conversation. This shift has not only expanded the reach of communication but also introduced new complexities and challenges. For strategic communicators, understanding these nuances is crucial to effectively engage with diverse audiences and navigate the intricacies of modern media.

One of the most significant changes in recent years is the rise of social media as a dominant force in public communication. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn have become central to the way individuals and organizations convey their messages. These platforms are not just tools for personal expression; they are powerful channels for political discourse, environmental activism, corporate branding, and much more. Social media platforms have revolutionized the way we communicate, providing unprecedented opportunities for interaction and engagement. The accessibility and immediacy of these platforms have made them indispensable tools for individuals and organizations alike. However, this shift has also brought about new challenges, particularly in the areas of information accuracy, privacy, and the amplification of misinformation.

The speed at which information spreads on social media can be both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it allows for rapid dissemination of important news and updates. On the other hand, it can lead to the spread of false information before it can be fact-checked. The phenomenon of "fake news" has become a significant concern, highlighting the need for media literacy and critical thinking skills among users. Moreover, the algorithms that drive social media platforms tend to create echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs. This can reinforce biases and polarize public opinion. For communicators, this means that crafting messages that can break through these echo chambers and reach a broader audience is more important than ever.

Emotional engagement has always been a key component of effective communication, but its importance has been magnified in the digital age. The virality of content on social media is often driven by its emotional impact. Posts that evoke strong emotions, whether positive or

negative, are more likely to be shared and commented on, increasing their reach and influence. Understanding the emotional triggers of different audience segments is crucial for communicators. This involves not only tapping into universal emotions like joy, anger, and sadness but also tailoring messages to the specific cultural and social contexts of the audience. Effective emotional engagement can build stronger connections with the audience, fostering loyalty and advocacy. However, there is a delicate balance to be maintained. Over-reliance on emotional manipulation can backfire, leading to cynicism and distrust. Authenticity is key; messages that resonate on an emotional level must also be grounded in truth and integrity to maintain credibility.

Corporate communication has also evolved significantly in the digital age. Companies are no longer just engaging in one-way communication through traditional advertising and public relations. Instead, they are participating in a continuous dialogue with their stakeholders, facilitated by social media and other digital platforms. This shift has brought about the concept of "corporate listening", where companies actively monitor and respond to conversations about their brand. Digital listening tools enable companies to track mentions, sentiments, and trends in real-time, providing valuable insights that can inform their communication strategies. By listening to their audience, companies can address concerns, build relationships, and enhance their reputation. Moreover, the rise of corporate influencers has added a new dimension to corporate communication. These individuals, often employees or executives, use their personal social media profiles to advocate for their company and share industry insights. Their authentic and relatable content can humanize the brand and build trust with the audience.

Meanwhile, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing the field of communication. From content creation to data analysis, AI tools are being increasingly integrated into communication practices. These technologies offer numerous benefits, including increased efficiency, personalized messaging, and enhanced creativity. AI-powered tools can generate content at scale, tailor messages to individual preferences, and analyze vast amounts of data to uncover trends and insights. This allows communicators to focus on more strategic tasks, such as crafting compelling narratives and developing innovative campaigns. However, the integration of AI also presents challenges. There are ethical considerations related to data privacy and the potential for algorithmic bias. Additionally, while AI can augment human capabilities, it cannot replace the creativity, empathy, and nuanced understanding that human communicators bring to the table. A balanced approach that leverages the strengths of both AI and human intelligence is essential.

As we look to the future, it is clear that the field of communication will continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Technological advancements will bring new opportunities and challenges, requiring communicators to stay adaptable and innovative. The ability to navigate this dynamic landscape will be crucial for success. Continuous learning and professional development are

essential. The communication landscape is constantly changing, and staying up-to-date with the latest trends and technologies is crucial. This requires a commitment to lifelong learning and a willingness to embrace new ideas and approaches. Ethical and responsible communication practices are more important than ever. In an era where misinformation and disinformation are rampant, communicators have a responsibility to ensure that their messages are truthful, transparent, and respectful. By adhering to high ethical standards, we can build trust and credibility with our audiences. Critical and strategic thinking is paramount. Effective communicators must be able to analyze complex situations, identify key issues, and develop innovative solutions. This requires a combination of analytical thinking, creative problem-solving, and strategic planning.

These topics are dealt with in a total of six chapters based on current studies. Their topics and authors will now be briefly presented.

In their study "You Talk, We Listen, Everyone Benefits: A qualitative study of value creation through digital corporate listening for different company sizes on the German market", the authors Stefan Eberherr, Alexandra Grüber, Lea Limpert, Sophie Steindorf, and Johanna Twittenhoff examine to what extent B2C companies of different sizes operating on the German market create value from the customer voice through digital corporate listening. New technologies enable customers to communicate directly with companies, often in real time. Companies are visible on more channels than ever before and need to manage all the input that these developments bring. When adapted efficiently, digital corporate listening can contribute to a company's value creation. But where do companies in the German market stand when it comes to using digital corporate listening? This question is answered by means of qualitative interviews with communication professionals responsible for digital corporate listening. The results provide insights into the status quo of digital corporate listening and its value creation for companies of all sizes.

The integration of generative AI in communication agencies is explored in the second chapter by Abel Fekade, Nico Keppeler, Elise Mattheus, Isabel Merz, and Lotta Wegner. Their study "Intelligent communication? Use of generative AI applications in communication agencies" investigates how agencies implement AI, its impact on client perceptions, and the subsequent strategic adaptations. Generative AI tools like ChatGPT and DeepL are transforming the industry by enhancing efficiency, creativity, and content quality. Framed by the Technology-Organization-Environment model, the study examines applications ranging from creating press releases to managing strategic programs and automating responses. Despite the benefits, concerns about data protection, content accuracy, and the need for specific prompting skills remain significant challenges. The findings underscore substantial operational benefits and call for further research to understand AI's long-term implications and refine its integration into agency practices.

Digital Transformation is impacting the field of communication management in many ways. As this transformation unfolds, the role of communication managers is being redefined, requiring a fresh set of competencies to navigate the changing terrain effectively. In chapter 3, Christopher Buller, Sophia Koderer, Denise Kunz, Jule Schepers, and Julia Stumpf analyze the changing competency profiles of professionals in the field due to latest AI developments. Their paper, titled "Communication management 2.0: A qualitative survey on the effects of AIs on the competence portfolio in communication management", raises the question of how the evolution of artificial intelligence in businesses influences the competency profile of communication managers. The study, which utilized both systematic surveys and qualitative open-ended interviews with 15 German experienced communication managers of different companies, reveals a dual trend: the increasing reliance on AI for operational tasks and the evolving perception of communication managers' roles. Despite the clear trend towards AI integration, the study highlights a significant variation in how companies implement these technologies.

In the domain of professional networking, the interplay between personal branding and corporate representation has never been more intricate, particularly on platforms like LinkedIn. Chapter 4, derived from an in-depth analysis conducted by researchers Kelly Busch, Kirsten Göthel, Dominik Kewe, Carl Krauß, and Laura Zapke, examines the strategic self-staging of corporate influencers (CIs) within the German-speaking LinkedIn community. Their chapter "Self-staging or brand authenticity? A qualitative content analysis of German-language LinkedIn posts by high-reach corporate influencers" employs the theoretical framework of impression management to examine the content of 100 LinkedIn posts from the Top Voices program. This analysis aims to elucidate the strategies employed by CIs to construct their public personas and reflect the image of their corporate brands. Guided by Kuckartz's structured qualitative content approach, the analysis uncovers the diverse topics addressed by these influencers. The analysis reveals that CIs not only share insights on educational pursuits and personal growth, but also blend in their personal life experiences, thereby adding a layer of relatability and authenticity.

The fifth chapter examines the populist communication strategies employed by the German political party "Alternative für Deutschland" (Alternative for Germany; AfD) on the social media platform TikTok. The party's growing popularity on this platform has led to an increased focus on its communication on TikTok. In their qualitative content analysis, titled "Right-wing populist communication of the AfD party on TikTok. To what extent does the AfD use TikTok as part of its communication to win over young voters?", the authors Kalkidan Claasen, Anna Kollmer, Malte Schlage, Alicia Schöpflin, Jessica Winkler, and Hannes Witerspan raise the question of to what extent the AfD use TikTok as part of its communication strategy to win over young voters. Based on the investigation of 120 videos from six accounts using the framing theory, the results show that AfD communication covers topics such as security, anti-

establishment attributes, and identity politics. Moreover, the linguistic and stylistic devices employed by the AfD on TikTok and the extent to which the party adheres to current platform rules are investigated. The findings underscore the necessity for democratic parties to adapt their communication strategy on the TikTok platform in order to ultimately reach not only young voters, but also the growing electorate.

Finally, this book concludes with a paper "Emotionality and fact orientation in environmental activism: A comparative content analysis of the communication of Fridays For Future and Letzte Generation on Instagram" by Saskia Damaschke, Vanessa Freudl, Patricia Görsch, Louisa Marko, and Noa Sandke that explores the role of emotionality and fact-orientation in the communication of the two environmental activism groups "Fridays For Future" (FFF) and "Letzte Generation" (Last Generation; LG) on Instagram. Activism can have a significant impact on political and economic changes. Although both groups emerged from the need to tackle the climate crisis, FFF relies on peaceful protest while LG employs more radical courses of action. In light of their different choice of means of protest the authors examine the ways in which they communicate and mobilize. Since they suggest the emotionality and fact-orientation has a significant influence in this, they employed framing theory. With the help of collective action frames, it was possible to investigate how the movements represent themselves and climate change. To gain understanding of the use of different frames they utilize a comparative qualitative content analysis of 283 image and video posts on Instagram. The results provide insights into the framing strategies which can help political decision-makers to better understand and take into account the concerns of environmental movements.

You Talk, We Listen, Everyone Benefits

A qualitative study of value creation through digital corporate listening for different company sizes on the German market

Stefan Eberherr, Alexandra Grüber, Lea Limpert, Sophie Steindorf, Johanna Twittenhoff

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Abstract

The following paper contributes to the current challenge of communicators to clarify the value creation potential of digital Corporate Listening (DCL), which is crucial for companies to prepare relevant content for customers and strengthen trust in brands. As a theoretical basis, DCL is classified into the value creation process of the company on three levels: The measures at the operational level, the communicative value creation through Secondary Alignment and the corporate value creation through Primary Alignment. The aim of the study is to find out to what extent B2C companies of different sizes operating on the German market create value from the Customer Voice through DCL. The interviews with communication professionals responsible for DCL confirm corporate and communicative value creation across all company sizes. The integration of the Customer Voice into the communication strategy is considered important, but the specific implementation and the contribution to communicative value creation vary depending on the company and context. Most companies still face challenges in the widespread implementation of Secondary Alignment. In particular, the lack of resources and personnel as well as time constraints limit the influence of the Customer Voice on communication activities. Differences in the activities, processes and structures of DCL can be identified regardless of company size and range from systematization facilitated by software to manual frequency analyses. The differences in processes can be assumed to lie with the level of digital skills of those responsible. Communicators are recommended to invest in their skills training in the areas of strategic thinking and digital competencies.

Keywords: corporate communication, digital Corporate Listening, value creation, Customer Voice, inbound communication

Introduction

"The future of corporate communication is unreservedly digital" (Badham & Luoma-aho, 2023, p. 1). The possibilities of real-time communication and increased visibility have fundamentally changed the demands placed on companies, especially with regard to their stakeholder interactions. Customers are increasingly engaging with companies digitally. For example, 66% of German Edelman Trust Barometer participants stated that they interact directly

and continuously with brands via social media (Edelman, 2023b). When it comes to stake-holder management as a central task of communication management, companies must respond to these new requirements and their stakeholders' interests (Zerfass & Link, 2022). In this context, *Corporate Listening* (CL) is crucial to devise relevant content for stakeholders (Burnside-Lawry, 2011; Macnamara, 2016). Its implementation, however, is neglected and research in communication science is rare: Between 2000 and 2021, out of 35 studies published on CL, only ten studies utilized a qualitative research design (Yip & Fischer, 2022). Implementing digital Corporate Listening (DCL) on social media increases the feeling of trust in brands (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Especially in the communication industry, where building and maintaining trust is one of the biggest challenges (Zerfass et al., 2023) and trust in a brand also results in a higher likelihood of purchase (Edelman, 2023b), DCL is a central activity. Nevertheless, CL activities, like communication departments in general, face the constant challenge of justifying value creation to management (Zerfass et al., 2015). In addition, successful implementation is tied to resources and processes (Macnamara, 2022), which poses challenges for communicators in the context of digitalization (White et al., 2024).

To achieve a deeper understanding of the contribution of DCL to value creation, the theoretical analysis combines two areas of corporate communications research: value creation research and corporate listening research. Based on the existing research in these areas, a theoretical framework is derived that provides an extension of the framework described by Borner and Zerfass (2018). Thereby, the study combines several concepts, such as the *Communication Value Circle* (CVC, Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017), the *Architecture of Listening* (Macnamara, 2015), the *Seven Canons of Listening* (Macnamara, 2015), and the concept of *Alignment* (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). This is done with the overall company serving as a reference point (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). Using this approach, the paper illustrates that value creation through DCL requires both effectiveness at the strategic level and efficiency at the operational level (Bach et al., 2017; Zerfass & Huck, 2007). The extent to which these theoretical assumptions about corporate communication, in general, can also be applied to the specific mode of DCL is empirically examined in this study.

A qualitative survey method in the form of semi-standardized guided interviews is chosen to explore the value creation levels of DCL. Communication professionals from B2C companies of different sizes operating on the German market that implement DCL activities were selected. In the context of this research project, these professionals are understood as employees responsible for DCL within their company. The company selection focuses exclusively on companies belonging to one of the industries classified as most trustworthy according to the Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2023a, p. 44): Healthcare, Education, Technology, Hotels and Hospitality, Manufacturing, Food and Beverage, and Retail.

In addition, the companies are divided into small and large companies according to their size, based on the European Commission Recommendation (2003/361/EC) (European Union, 2003). This allows for comparison regarding the influence of the complexity and scope of the company (Birkinshaw & Heywood, 2010) on DCL activities and processes, since the influence of these pre-conditions has not yet been researched on the German market. Thus, considering the relevance of DCL for the interaction with customers, the lack of research and implementation regarding this topic as well as the intra-organizational complexities influencing listening processes, this research paper examines the following research leading question (RLQ): *To what extent do B2C companies of different sizes operating on the German market derive value from the Customer Voice through digital Corporate Listening?*

Theory

To discover how companies conduct DCL and how the resulting insights can be used to generate value, this work brings together two research directions: corporate listening research and value creation through corporate communication. The term *value* is versatile in its use and interpretation (Bartsch, 2015) and includes both tangible and intangible values (Nothhaft, 2023). The value creation outcome refers to the additional value that companies create by combining and transforming all types of resources in such a way that products, services, or other results with a higher overall value are produced (Zerfass & Volk, 2022). To differentiate more clearly in the subsequent theoretical explanations, the process is referred to as value creation and the result of the process as value. A discussion point in research is whether communication contributes to a company's value creation (Nothhaft, 2023). This study follows the tradition of the "Leipzig School" approach (Nothhaft, 2023, p. 12) which advocates for not questioning whether communication contributes to value creation but rather how it does so. For this study, the following definition of CL is applied:

> [Corporate] listening comprises the creation and implementation of scalable processes and systems that enable decision makers and policy makers in organizations to actively and effectively access, acknowledge, understand, consider, and appropriately respond to all those who wish to communicate with the organization or with whom the organization wishes to communicate interpersonally or through delegated, mediated means (Macnamara, 2019, p. 14).

In the existing body of research, emphasis is put on the micro and meso levels in Public Relations, as well as on the significance of interpersonal context (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). Macnamara's strong influence in the field is based on being the first to systematically investigate listening at the macro level with the characteristics of interpersonal listening (Borner & Zerfass, 2018).

Theoretical framework

As a strategic communication mode, CL has to be placed over concrete situations, stakeholders and departments (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Therefore, the following discussion refers to the company as a whole, not just the communication department (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). To place CL in the company's overall value chain, a new theoretical framework is developed which expands the existing framework by Borner and Zerfass (2018) to include additional concepts. Based on management (e.g. Drucker, 2002) and communication research (e.g. Zerfass & Volk, 2018), this framework distinguishes the value creation through CL in two levels: On a strategic level, the focus is on developing effectively aligned goals and strategies as opposed to the operational level, where the challenge is to exploit the existing goals and strategies as efficiently as possible (Bach et al., 2017). The theoretical framework for this study is shown in Figure 1 and further explained in the following subsections.

Figure 1

Theoretical framework for value creation through digital Corporate Listening
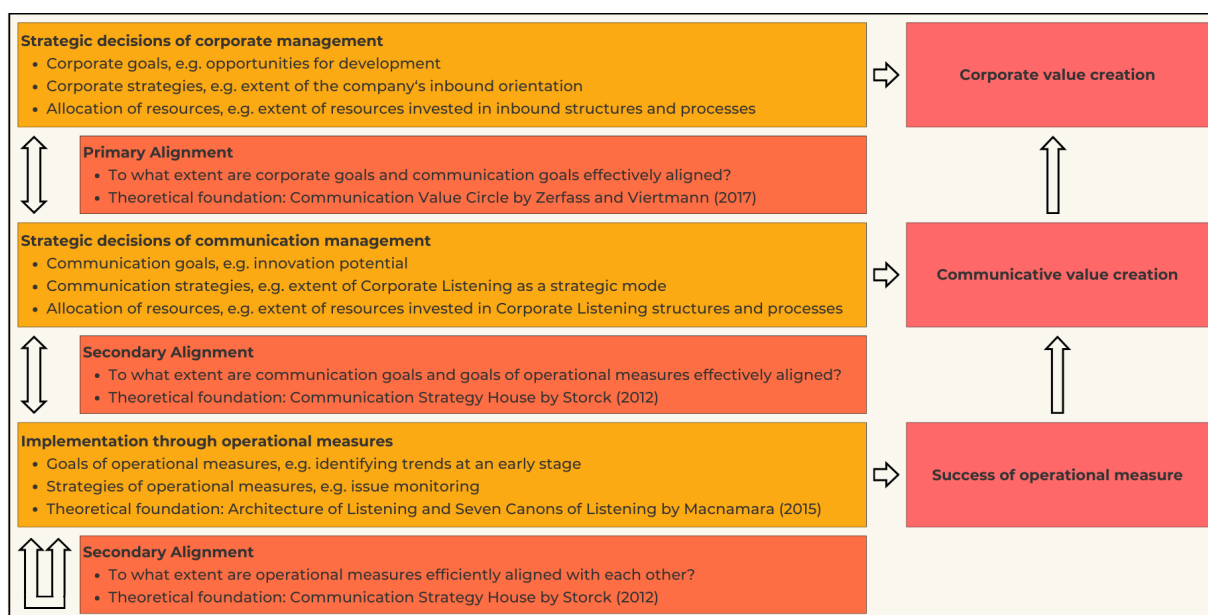
Note. Own illustration based on Borner and Zerfass (2018); Chandler (1969); Drucker (2002); Volk and Zerfass (2018); Zerfass and Viertmann (2017); Zerfass and Volk (2022).

Corporate Listening on a strategic level

Strategic management includes "the determination of the basic long-term goals … and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals" (Chandler, 1969, p. 13). It is necessary for the overall company as well as for specific functional areas, such as the communication department (Zerfass & Volk, 2022). The success of strategic management is measured by the effectiveness of the chosen goals and strategies (Zerfass, 2022), i.e. the "ability to get the right things done" (Drucker, 2002, p. 5).

The CVC by Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) supports managers in identifying effective links between corporate and communication goals. The concept of *Primary Alignment* refers to the "varying degree of [effective] linkage between the communication strategy and the overall organizational strategy … for the purpose of achieving organizational goals" (Volk & Zerfass, 2018, p. 443)*.*

Corporate goals and Inbound Orientation as a mode of corporate strategy

In the CVC four dimensions of corporate value are identified: (1) *Tangible assets* describe the company's financial resources, whereas (2) *intangible assets* are defined as immaterial resources that influence stakeholders' behavioural dispositions in the long run, (3) *room for maneuver* indicates the degree of flexibility in corporate activities and (4) *opportunities for development* enable the company to reposition itself strategically by adapting to market and socio-political developments (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, pp. 72-73). A company's resources are limited, so not all corporate values can be realized (Zerfass et al., 2018). It is the strategic task of corporate management to prioritize values in order to define company-specific goals (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). The corporate strategy determines how these goals are to be realized by coordinating the interaction with the environment through two complementary strategic modes (Borner & Zerfass, 2018): A company's *Outbound Orientation* refers to its outward conveyance of messages (Borner & Zerfass, 2018), whereas the *Inbound Orientation* "means to be sensitive to environmental actors in order to receive impulses and to integrate them into managerial decisions" (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 9).

The degree of a company's Inbound Orientation is a strategic question (Daft & Weick, 1984), which is reflected in the resources that corporate management is willing to invest in inbound processes and structures (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Chandler, 1969). According to Borner and Zerfass (2018), this varying degree of Inbound Orientation can be described on a continuum between two poles: Insensitive companies with a weak Inbound Orientation consider their environment just as a potential risk and make strategic decisions from an internal perspective only reacting, not interacting with their environment. With inflexible management processes and under strict guidelines, they sporadically consider inevitable environmental impulses only to avoid potential crises. Sensitive companies with a strong Inbound Orientation view their environment as an opportunity for development and actively interact with it to base strategic decisions on an inside-out perspective. To extract strategic impulses from their environment, sensitive companies implement comprehensive management processes and flexible corporate structures.

Communicative goals and Corporate Listening as a mode of communication strategy

The CVC categorizes the various value potentials of corporate communications in a total of four dimensions of communicative value by effectively aligning each of them to one the

four corporate values: (1) *Enabling operations* by fostering publicity as well as employee and customer commitment; (2) *building intangibles* by strengthening the brand, reputation and corporate culture; (3) *ensuring flexibility* by building and expanding relationships, trust and legitimacy; (4) *adjusting strategy* by improving thought leadership, innovation potential and crisis resilience within the company (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 75). Just as the resources of the whole company are limited, so are the resources of the communications department, meaning that not all communicative values can be realized and the communication management is forced to prioritize (Nothhaft & Bentele, 2022), which is also sensible since "not every single goal is as relevant for each communication department or situation" (Volk et al., 2017, p. 26). Communicative value only contributes to corporate value creation if the achieved communication goals are effectively aligned with the overall corporate goals (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). If communication goals are not effectively aligned with the pursued corporate goals, a state of *Primary Misalignment* (Volk & Zerfass, 2018, p. 446), the communication department fails to contribute to the overall value creation of the company even if communicative value is created (Zerfass & Volk, 2022, p. 470).

The communication strategy defines how the prioritized communication goals are to be achieved by balancing between two strategic modes of environment interaction (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Zerfass & Volk, 2022): *Corporate Messaging* refers to the "process of conveying content (corporate messages) and is thus associated analytically to the outbound dimension" (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 13). The company's Inbound Orientation is expressed communicatively in form of *Corporate Listening*, through which "articulated impulses from stakeholders as well as relevant context variables are intentionally and selectively perceived, interpreted and evaluated in order to support corporate decision-making" (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 13). Communication management can effectively link the communication strategy with the corporate strategy by aligning the strategic decision on the extent of CL with the degree of the company's Inbound Orientation (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Ingenhoff et al., 2022). At the same time, the extent of CL and the associated allocation of resources must be based on the prioritized communication goals (Zerfass et al., 2022). While Corporate Messaging tends to focus on building tangible and intangible values, room for maneuver and development opportunities is primarily achieved through CL (Rolke & Zerfass, 2014). Yet CL has the potential to contribute to all four dimensions of communicative value and, through them, to all dimensions of corporate value as illustrated by Borner and Zerfass (2018): Through CL customer preferences can be considered in internal decisions such as the product design and thereby initiate product innovations (development of opportunities), generate acceptance of the new product (room for maneuver) or increase sales (tangible assets). Furthermore, the *Employee Voice* can be integrated in management decisions, which contributes to intangible values such as corporate culture.

Even if it is only insufficiently practiced in companies (Borner & Zerfass, 2018), Primary Alignment should be understood as a reciprocal process that also includes adapting the corporate strategy to communicative insights (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). CL creates communicative values, such as innovation potential, topic leadership and crisis resilience (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 75). This enables the corporate management to adapt its strategy to environmental developments and thus explore new development opportunities in the form of competitive advantages (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017): "The communication department's reflective function as a boundary spanner is critical to corporate success" (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, pp. 75–76).

Corporate Listening on an operational level

Based on the framework of the strategic, the operational level focuses on present orientation compared to future orientation (Bach et al., 2017), the question not being of effectiveness but of efficiency (Falkenheimer et al., 2016). The efficiency of linking specific measures among each other and to the communication strategy can be illustrated with the help of the *Communication Target House* (Zerfass et al., 2023). The Seven Canons of Listening and the Architecture of Listening by Macnamara (2015) provide the necessary structural and process conditions to understand what is heard.

Activities, structures, and processes of Corporate Listening

The activities through which stakeholder information can be captured are diverse (Macnamara, 2019), including surveys, stakeholder dialogues, issue monitoring, and social media monitoring (Macnamara, 2015). Interactive tools such as comment functions on company websites are also part of DCL (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). The Architecture of Listening by Macnamara (2015) in its structure represents a set of conditions for effective and efficient listening in companies (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). Macnamara thus applies the prerequisites and elements of Corporate Listening to processes and structures in companies (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). The eight elements of the Architecture of Listening are: *Culture, politics of listening, policies, structures* and *processes, technologies, resources, skills,* and *articulation* (Macnamara, 2015, p. 19).

For CL, the key is not the perception but the processing of articulated stakeholder impulses (Macnamara, 2019). Macnamara (2015, pp. 19-20) details the Seven Canons of Listening as necessary conditions for a company to understand what has been heard, comprising *recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration,* and *responding*. To contribute to value creation, four canons are especially relevant: Interpretation means interpreting articulated stakeholder impulses as fairly and objectively as possible. The understanding phase is particularly relevant for the contribution of Corporate Listening to the company's success. Even if it is not possible to fully understand the expectations and feelings

of all stakeholders due to limited resources, it is essential to try to do this as well as possible. Consideration means paying attention to articulated stakeholder impulses. The subsequent responding does not automatically imply agreement, but depending on the inquiry, criticism, or wish, should imply attuned action. (Macnamara, 2015)

Corporate Listening: Goals and strategy of measures

CL measures include both the method of data collection and the established structures in the company that serve to capture and process stakeholder impulses (Ingenhoff et al., 2022). The communication strategy is oriented towards communication goals, and subsequent measures are derived that enable the operational implementation of these goals (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). *Secondary Alignment* is both the linking of CL measures with the communication strategy and the interconnection of the listening measures with each other (Volk & Zerfass, 2018) and aims to create a consistent and unified image of the company among stakeholders. The Communication Target House visualizes the respective stakeholder groups with the adapted measures and goals. The tool is suitable for depicting the interconnection of individual communication measures with each other (Zerfass et al., 2023). Linking the communication activities with the communication strategy is essential for communication measures to contribute to value creation at the corporate level (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). If this is not the case, the result could be a heterogeneous corporate image, referred to as *Secondary Misalignment* (Volk & Zerfass, 2018, p. 443).

Scope of the research project

The impulses articulated by customers (Macnamara, 2020), referred to as the Customer Voice, has increased relevance for revenue assurance and the image of a company, and thus also for both tangible and intangible value creation (Macnamara, 2020). Borner and Zerfass (2018) emphasize that systematic listening is particularly relevant for companies in the B2C sector because it enables the early detection of fast-moving trends and the timely utilization of innovation potentials. Another reason why this work is limited to B2C companies in different industries is the importance of listening due to external factors, such as regulation or the sensitivity of industries (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). Because of these characteristics, listening in the B2C sector is of particular research interest and will be examined in this study.

Methodology

This paper integrates two research disciplines of corporate communication into a consistent research object: value creation- and corporate listening research. A merger that has so far only been proposed by Borner and Zerfass (2018). To get a more in-depth understanding of the contribution of DCL to corporate value, further theoretical differentiation and empirical

investigation is required (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 19), which this study aims to achieve by addressing the following RLQ: *To what extent do B2C companies of different sizes operating on the German market derive value from the Customer Voice through digital Corporate Listening?* The theoretical differentiation of the framework by Borner and Zerfass (2018) was implemented in the previous chapter by transferring various theoretical concepts of corporate communication to the specific research object of value creation through DCL. To empirically assess their applicability, the RLQ is broken down into three research questions (RQ), each addressing one level of the value chain illustrated in Figure 1. Limiting the focus to the Customer Voice in B2C companies promises in-depth results, as companies use CL mainly for customer relations (Macnamara, 2014; Zerfass et al., 2015), which are particularly important for B2C companies (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). The focus on companies operating on the German market is due to research economical reasons and the research gap described in the introduction.

Research questions

As a strategic mode of the communication department, CL can only create value if it is effectively linked to the goals and strategies of the overall company (Drucker, 2002; Volk & Zerfass, 2018). If Primary Alignment is not ensured, it does not matter how many of its goals the communication department achieves through CL, as the resulting communicative value will not contribute to corporate goals (Volk & Zerfass, 2018; Zerfass & Volk, 2022). With its first research question, this paper contributes to a better understanding of value creation through DCL on a strategic level.

> RQ1: *To what extent do communication professionals expect digital Corporate Listening as a mode of communication strategy to contribute to corporate value creation through Primary Alignment?*

Secondly, the significance of Secondary Alignment for communicative value creation is addressed. Empirical studies on its efficacy are not yet extensive (Volk & Zerfass, 2018) and so theory remains disputed (Nothhaft, 2023). This controversy (Zerfass & Volk, 2018) makes examining the relationships between communication and value creation particularly relevant.

> RQ2: *To what extent do communication professionals expect digital Corporate Listening measures of the Customer Voice to contribute to communicative value creation through Secondary Alignment?*

Thirdly, the operational implementation of DCL measures is dealt with. For companies to gain value through listening, adequate activities, processes and structures must be implemented. Macnamara (2015) has established the Architecture of Listening as framework conditions and the Seven Canons of Listening as phases of the comprehension process. The relevance of customers for B2C companies is emphasized in the literature (Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Macnamara, 2019).

RQ3: *What measures are used to implement digital Corporate Listening regarding the Customer Voice?*

Methodological background and execution

A qualitative survey method in the form of partially standardized guided interviews was selected to address the research questions. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the qualitative guided interview method is well-suited to yield detailed and comprehensive insights into the implementation of DCL. Semi-standardized methods also afford researchers the opportunity to further elaborate on statements made and to deepen the content of the conversation if necessary (Brosius et al., 2022). The population of this research study consists of B2C companies on the German market of varying sizes that engage in DCL. In order to differentiate the companies by size, the recommendation (2003/361/EC) of the European Commission (European Union, 2003) is employed as a guide and applied. In addition, the seven most trustworthy industries, as identified by the Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2023a, p. 44), were selected as a further criterion.

In order to address the research questions, those are operationalized in interview questions which are then gathered in an interview guide and divided into three thematic blocks. Those are staggered from operational implementation (RQ3), continuing with the communicative value creation (RQ2) and concluding with the corporate value creation (RQ1). A total of six individuals were interviewed, each of whom was responsible for DCL within their respective companies. The sample consisted of three large and three small companies, as detailed in Table 1. Between January 18, 2024, and February 28, 2024, all six interviews were conducted via a digital video conferencing platform and transcribed in accordance with the transcription rules set forth by Dresing and Pehl (2018). The content was then subjected to a qualitative content analysis using MAXQDA 2024 based on the procedure proposed by Mayring (2014) for the analysis of content-structuring qualitative content analysis. The category system was deductively derived from the research questions and the interview guide prior to the interviews being analyzed. It was then inductively supplemented using the material (Brosius et al., 2022). The statements made by the interviewees are used to generate hypotheses that capture the current status of implementation and value creation as an answer to the research question of this study.

Table 1

Overview of the company size, industry and job title of the interviewees

Interview	Company size	Industry	Job description
B1	Large	Food & Beverage	Head of PR & Corporate Communication
B2	Large	Manufacturing	Head of Customer Engagement
B3	Small	Technology	Head of Online Marketing
B4	Large	Education	Department Head "Communication Digital"
B5	Small	Retail	CEO
B6	Small	Manufacturing	Customer Happiness Manager

Results

This research paper aims to investigate the value creation of the Customer Voice through the use of DCL in B2C companies of different sizes operating on the German market. In the following, the results of the interviews with regard to the RLQ will be presented.

Primary Alignment and corporate value creation

RQ1 examines the contribution of DCL at a corporate level (see Figure 1). In a preliminary step, the available resources and the reason for carrying out DCL were assessed in order to gain an insight into the strategic orientation and thus the sensitivity of the company.

Reasons and resources for digital Corporate Listening implementation

When naming the reasons for carrying out DCL, most companies saw the relevance in the proximity to their customers in order to (1) *understand customer needs*, (2) *recognize trends early on*, (3) *create customer loyalty and satisfaction*, and (4) in the *potential usage of both positive and negative feedback*. Other reasons included (5) *establishing and maintaining image* and (6) *minimizing the risk of comments* that could have a negative impact on the company. The latter two reasons were emphasized by small companies. The large companies in particular can be classified as sensitive, as they saw a development opportunity in their environment in the active tracking of trend developments, the perception of innovation potential, and the proximity to customers: "The customer pays our wages. So in the end, if we don't listen to them, then we can all look for a new job" (B2 [translated]).

In terms of resources, only one of the surveyed companies was able to provide an answer regarding the budget share available for DCL:

You have to differentiate slightly. If it's purely social listening, really just tracking down trends out there and so on, then it's 5%. But if it takes into account listening in the dialogue channels, in messaging processes, then it's 50:50, because we logically have to do both. (B2 [translated])

Other companies were unable to make a statement on this or a specific budget was requested by the department but not made available at the time of the interview. These results reflect the complementary relationship between messaging and listening (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). As both modes were implemented by the same people within the departments and these two activities influenced each other, a precise breakdown of the distribution of DCL resources is difficult and poses a challenge currently faced by communication professionals.

Corporate value creation emerges through the company-wide usage of gained insights from the Customer Voice

Five of the six interviewees were able to confirm the added value that findings from the Customer Voice generated for the entire company. The sixth person implied added value, but did not confirm it concretely. Corporate value was created through the transfer of knowledge to other departments: (1) R&D or product development teams, (2) management, (3) quality assurance, (4) production management and (5) responsible project teams. One interviewee described the knowledge transfer as such:

If an above-average [number] of people ... say "Hey, we finally want a second [product type]",... we also report it to the management. In the same way, if criticism piles up in one direction, … we also keep a record of that ... . This is then passed on to the plant management and our quality assurance team. (B1 [translated])

These insights confirm DCL as a cross-departmental mode (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). The interviews revealed that value creation emerged via the following activities and potentials in the above-mentioned departments: (1) *Process changes and optimizations*, (2) *product optimizations* and (3) *product range adjustments* through product range expansions or reductions, (4) *new customer acquisition*, and (5) *customer retention*. Several interviewees mentioned weighing up customer wishes with regard to their feasibility: "If we could have made [this product], we would have immediately said 'so many comments, we're dropping everything, we're now rebuilding our entire production'" (B1 [translated]). Three companies explicitly addressed the importance of positive feedback through DCL. While one large company forwarded positive feedback as praise to departments, small companies mentioned positive customer reviews in order to use them as a "positive external impact" (B5 [translated]) and thus being able to demonstrate a unique selling point.

Summed up, DCL leads to corporate value creation in the following areas: (1) *company-wide process changes*, (2) *product range adjustments*, (3) *feedback management* and (4)

advertising opportunities. Therefore, those responsible for DCL acted as consultants to make recommendations regarding the corporate strategy (Mykkänen & Vos, 2015). The previously observed difficulty of clearly identifying resources and receiving requested funds reflects the current challenges faced by communicators. As listed above, insights added value for the entire company. The generated value for other company departments shows the current difficulty that communicators have in justifying their resource requests and that solutions such as business models for communication departments are trying to solve (Zerfass & Link, 2022).

Primary Alignment mainly takes place by adapting individual communication measures to the corporate strategy

Interviewees either denied or were unable to confirm an adaptation of DCL activities after the announcement of new corporate strategies and goals. Only one company explicitly addressed the linkage between corporate strategy and communication strategy: "as a rule, a [corporate] strategy is not adapted without having listened beforehand. At least not for us. .... Listening generates insights and insights can influence strategies, but they don't have to" (B2 [translated]). Consequently, the implementation of reciprocal strategy changes could not be confirmed with the knowledge gained through the interviews. This seems to mostly be due to the fact that interviewees mentioned the corporate strategies to have remained constant or because only individual measures were reviewed at departmental level and adapted where necessary. One assumption for the lack of iterative alignment might be the absence of necessity due to the long-term nature of corporate and departmental strategies (Bach et al., 2017). On the other hand, communicators show a lack of strategic knowledge - a fact that has already been identified in strategic communication research and is classified as being problematic (Buhmann & Volk, 2022). Because the previously mentioned reasons for the implementation of DCL were derived from corporate objectives, they prove an initial Primary Alignment - or at least contradict the misalignment discussed in the theory section above (Volk & Zerfass, 2018).

Secondary Alignment and communicative value creation

Analogous to Figure 1, the research question attempts to investigate the influence of DCL on the communication strategy, on the linking of digital listening activities to each other as well as to messaging activities and on the communicative value creation.

The influence of the Customer Voice on the communication strategy is situational

First, the expectations of DCL within the department were examined in terms of communication goals and communicative value creation. Several of the companies focused on building a close relationship with customers through direct engagement. This was done via e-mail, contact form, and especially on social media: "We use social media and digital channels above all to offer service to customers and to emotionally bind customers to us" (B5

[translated]). The interviewees generally attached great importance to reviewing and processing all comments. Returns and complaints were named as a critical topic that needed to be dealt with quickly. Overall, it was shown that by using DCL, companies aimed to proactively use the insights gained from the Customer Voice to (1) *strengthen customer loyalty*, (2) *avoid potential crises* and (3) *promote a positive public brand perception* in the long term. The majority of the companies surveyed stated that they adapt communication content and objectives according to the situation: "The things we hear from customers on social media, we take note of. And depending on the frequency with which it comes to us, we would also change something in the communication strategy" (B5 [translated]).

Digital Corporate Listening is crucial for the optimization of messaging activities

The relevance of DCL for the optimization of communication measures was recognized by all interviewees and findings from the Customer Voice were actively incorporated into respective messaging measures. Respondents emphasized the importance of direct input from the Customer Voice for designing or optimizing their messaging, such as updating FAQs and communication guidelines for the external communication:

> Whenever something changes at our company, I, as head of communication ... immediately create a catalog with possible questions and answers … so that the communications team is … in good hands. These FAQs are also discussed in advance with the project manager and the management. (B1 [translated])

The majority of companies focused their DCL measures on optimizing external communication content, whereas there is no wide-spread linkage of DCL measures. Three companies demonstrated a systematic approach to linking DCL measures, for which they used different software tools, the others faced key challenges such as a lack of time and personnel. Thus, the integration of the Customer Voice into messaging measures was accorded a significantly greater importance in practice. This result is in line with empirical findings, which show that messaging dominates in most companies, while listening is used to optimize messaging (Borner & Zerfass, 2018).

The implementation and contribution of Customer Voice to communicative value creation vary

The specific contribution of insights gained from the Customer Voice to the communicative value creation varied. While some companies did not mention any explicit contribution, other companies showed a balanced use of DCL to understand customer needs and respond accordingly. One interviewee addressed the contribution of the Customer Voice to communication goals:

> If you [as a company] ... know what works and what doesn't work [in communication], you might be lucky enough to generate more sales, to be closer to the customer, to be more responsive to customer needs, to learn more, to be able to try things out[.] .... [Digital corporate listening] keeps us on "the cutting edge". (B2 [translated])

One small company emphasized the importance of the Customer Voice in identifying pain points and propagated an agile approach to adapting products and services. Almost all companies addressed the need for evaluation of the acquired feedback. One large company described the regular evaluation and integration of insights:

> It is then evaluated internally ... whether it really has any relevance for us, this feedback ... in the sense of "right, that's actually a good idea, we could really implement it or we should implement it because we see it the same way." (B4 [translated])

With regard to the second research question, it can be stated that communication managers view DCL as a tool that can contribute to communicative value creation through Secondary Alignment. This was expressed, among other things, in efforts to optimize messaging measures. However, the results revealed a variety in the implementation and integration of DCL measures. While some companies systematically integrated customer feedback into communication content, others faced challenges such as a lack of time and resources, which made it difficult to fully link and use Customer Voice with other communication activities. Despite these differences, the general recognition of the importance of Customer Voice for optimizing the communication strategy remained consistently high. It should be noted that the different interpretations of the term strategy made it difficult to adequately classify the findings.

Operative implementation of digital Corporate Listening

RQ3 examines the implementation of DCL within the responsible department, analyzing activities, structures, and processes used.

High relevance of social media, e-mails and review portals

The interviewees listed a wide range of channels used to actively engage in DCL. All companies surveyed stated that they used (1) social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn. One channel highlighted by most companies were (2) review portals such as Google reviews or TrustPilot. Other channels included (3) e-mail, (4) WhatsApp, (5) chatbots and two companies mentioned (6) online forums. While one small company sporadically and randomly monitored these forums, one large company stated: "[W]e scan or do social listening in general all over the [inter]net. So that when people become active on channels that we don't own, for example Reddit or some blogs or forums, and report about us, we notice that too" (B2 [translated]). The presence on various social media platforms revealed a strong focus on the phenomenon of *Social Listening* (Stewart & Arnold, 2018).

The aspect of personal interaction with customer feedback often depended on the subjective assessment of the person at the first point of contact:

When [a Google review] comes in and I see it, I answer it in peace [when I have the time]. And reactions on Facebook, Instagram, we also decide according to the situation whether to reply or just give a like or whatever. (B5 [translated])

Thus, according to the implementation of the Seven Canons of Listening, no fake or pseudo listening was identified in any of the companies (Macnamara, 2019). These findings are consistent with the previously established result that the interviewed companies predominantly acted sensitively. All interviewees stated that they responded to customer feedback. DCL was continuously implemented, however findings were processed reactively. In general, a difference in response behavior was observed as soon as automated processes were used.

Automation processes are not necessarily dependent on the size of the company

With regard to the use of software and tools in the processing of the Customer Voice, no significant discrepancies were found between the company sizes. Both small and large companies showed differences in the degree of automated processes. While one large company used artificial intelligence to systematically collect the content of customer feedback, other large companies manually created frequency analyses: "We still have a traditional Excel sheet where we note frequencies" (B1 [translated]). Previous results have already shown that all companies, regardless of their size and processes, created corporate value through DCL. Based on the working methods listed here, however, companies should be aware that the *interpretation* phase (Macnamara, 2015) could suffer as a result of manual and subjective editing processes, as the information should be recorded without distortion (Macnamara, 2020). The automation of answers to customer questions also varied. No automation was found in the interviews with small companies. In the case of large companies, a varying degree of automated response behavior was observed. Some companies relied on existing sample answers in their response behaviour: "We have databases with sample responses, but they are individualized. So nobody gets a copy-and-paste answer from us, otherwise we would have already done it all with some AI" (B1 [translated]).

Differences in the processing speed of Customer Voice insights

When asked about the existence of internal guidelines, no company was able to name specific metrics or regulations regarding DCL processes. Internally, the responsible persons and departments have drawn up rough guidelines for passing on content, e.g. forwarding complaints to the relevant departments, indicating that the basic requirements for articulation and policies listed in the Architecture of Listening were in place (Macnamara, 2020). A second aspect taken up by the interviewees with regard to the question of guidelines was the processing time of the Customer Voice, which varied from "half a day [...] for a critical comment" (B3

[translated]), "within two days" (B6 [translated]) up to six days, which in that case included a prior automated response so that customers could adjust to the processing time (B1). With regard to external guidelines, the General Data Protection Regulation was mentioned by one interviewee, however knowledge regarding specific requirements seemed vague: "I haven't come across any problems yet. So, I think we operate in the area of data protection" (B6 [translated]).

Key findings on the differences by company size

Looking at the differences that could be identified based on company size, the following findings emerged: Corporate value creation took place cross-departmentally in all company sizes. In small companies, value creation was occasionally generated by other departments, such as sales. As a result, DCL activity in the responsible marketing or communications department was reduced to activities such as minimizing the risk of negative comments, preventing shitstorms and in one case the purposeful decision not to offer customers further platforms to express themselves. Regardless of size, the scarcity of resources was always discussed. No significant differences in the operational implementation of DCL could be identified when comparing company sizes to each other. Both small and large companies varied in their processes amongst their size groups, highlighting the differentiated competencies in dealing with digital possibilities. Even if these variations in the Architecture of Listening (Macnamara, 2015) did not necessarily minimize the potential for value creation throughout the company, a more effective and resource-efficient way of working was observed with more pronounced digital knowledge. Thus, in addition to the development of strategic thinking, an investment in the skills of those responsible for DCL would therefore be beneficial for the optimized use of resources in the long term. These findings reflect the need for digital competencies of communicators, as discussed in the current debate (see White et al., 2024).

Limitations

Based on the explorative nature of qualitative guided interviews, this study provides novel insights into the current implementation of DCL measures by B2C companies in Germany's most trusted industries. Acquiring interviewees, however, posed challenges, resulting in limitations in the final sample. A key limitation was the small sample size of six companies. This limited the diversity and representation across different company sizes and industries. On a positive note, Manufacturing, Retail, Education, Food and Beverage, and Technology represent a total of five of the seven trustworthy sectors in the sample (Edelman, 2023a, p. 44). Despite efforts to adapt the acquisition process, including modifying the acquisition letter by replacing technical terms such as "digital Corporate Listening" with more accessible language like "digital Customer Voices" and using multiple communication channels (e-mail, LinkedIn,

phone calls), the response rate remained low. Compounding this issue was the timing of the acquisition period, coinciding with the holiday season, further impacting response rates.

Furthermore, the novelty of the DCL topic meant that many companies and employees were not familiar with it or even not aware that they were listening at all, leading to limited participation in the acquisition process. This lack of awareness and understanding of DCL, coupled with its perceived sensitivity in corporate strategy, contributed to challenges in securing interview participants, which was one reason why the technical term was deliberatively omitted when optimizing the acquisition process. In addition, listening is often given only marginal attention in practice, which leads to a discrepancy between research and actual implementation. Given this discrepancy, it is crucial that the present study addresses this issue to highlight its current relevance and to bridge the gap between theory and practical application.

Additionally, the varying positions of the interviewees within their respective companies presented another limitation. DCL is not a stand-alone department, but is integrated into different areas and divisions of organizational structures, making it difficult for interviewees to provide comprehensive insights across all aspects. For instance, employees from departments like customer engagement, where the listening function was anchored, lacked insights into other areas such as communication strategy. This variation in integration hindered the identification of appropriate contacts and compromised the comparability and generalizability of results. One way to avoid this problem would have been to limit the sample to companies whose communications department was responsible for CL activities. However, this would have made the acquisition of interview partners even more challenging.

Conclusion

This research project explores how B2C companies of various sizes operating on the German market derive value from the Customer Voice through DCL. The RLQ was divided into three research questions focusing on the implementation and expectations regarding communicative and corporate value creation through DCL. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with DCL managers working for companies from the most trusted B2C sectors in Germany. The results indicate that communication professionals expect DCL to contribute to corporate value creation, primarily aiming at enhancing customer satisfaction, a key business objective. This expectation is based on past experiences, which include a contribution of DCL to (1) company-wide process changes, (2) product and portfolio adjustments, (3) feedback management, and (4) advertising opportunities. There is an expected contribution to communicative value creation by using insights gained from the Customer Voice to optimize messaging. The implementation of DCL measures varies depending on available resources and the digital expertise of the professionals. Process differences were evident, such as manual frequency analysis using Excel versus using business intelligence software, illustrating varied

competencies in handling digital technologies across company sizes. These process differences, however, did not necessarily impede the utilization of insights or corporate value creation. Differences due to company size were observed: Smaller companies see value creation driven by other departments due to structural limitations and resource scarcity, however they do not lack sensitivity. All companies focus on customer satisfaction, facilitated by genuine feedback loops created through DCL.

In summary, it was found that the companies interviewed create value through the use of Customer Voice by enhancing customer satisfaction and strengthening their market position. They achieve this by optimizing products, company-wide processes, and their messaging. Depending on their use and knowledge of digital technologies, holistic perspectives are gained.

Practical implications

The findings highlight the various potentials for value creation when companies implement DCL practices. However, they shed light on the ongoing need for digital competencies in communication, as discussed in the current debate about the necessary skills for communicators. Training and qualification opportunities for handling digital technologies are crucial. The digital proximity to customers allows for departmental and company-wide optimizations. While process and structural differences did not necessarily diminish value creation potential, enhanced digital competencies can optimize operations and lead to effectiveness and efficiency in resource-saving practices.

Research implications

This study focuses on a small selection of companies within Germany's most trusted sectors, examining only insights derived from the Customer Voice. For a more holistic view of value creation through DCL, analyzing a larger sample across different industries or cultures, and considering a broader range of stakeholders, is recommended. A more comprehensive analysis of DCL implementation is required for robust academic recognition, however this study offers a starting point with valuable insights into communicative and corporate value creation through DCL and the use of the Customer Voice in B2C companies operating on the German market.

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Intelligent communication?

Use of generative AI applications in communication agencies

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Intelligent communication?

Qualitative insights into the usage of generative AI applications in communication agencies

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Abstract

The PR industry is experiencing significant developments with the introduction of generative AI applications, prompting significant changes and raising new questions about their implications for strategic communication, agency operations, and business models. This study examines the integration of generative AI applications in communication agencies, focusing on the utilization of these technologies, client perceptions, and strategic adaptations. Fifteen senior communication specialists from German communication agencies were interviewed using guided interviews. Their responses were analyzed qualitatively using content analysis. The findings indicate that generative AI is widely adopted, resulting in enhanced efficiency and quality in agency operations. While client feedback is predominantly positive, concerns about data protection and AI accuracy persist. Agencies are selectively transparent about AI usage, typically disclosing it only when AI significantly contributes to a task. The study highlights the ongoing strategic adaptation of agencies, predicting shifts from operational to strategic roles and potential changes in job profiles. The study underscores the importance of developing AI-related skills and strategies within communication agencies.

Keywords: communication agencies, artificial intelligence, generative artificial intelligence, strategic communication, digital transformation

Introduction

"AI will not replace you, but a person using AI will". The PR industry has not remained unaffected by the debate about the role of artificial intelligence (AI) applications. Just a few weeks after the company *OpenAI* presented its tool *ChatGPT* in the winter of 2022, communications expert Margot Edelmann predicted the beginning of a major new development (Bihlek & Schmidt, 2023).

The use of artificial intelligence in strategic communication is not a new phenomenon: Panda et al. described various possible applications of AI in PR as early as 2019. According to them, traditional AI-driven systems can support automated data processing, media list creation and scheduling, among other things. However, there is a limited understanding of AI among communication professionals, which can be attributed to a lack of skills and unclear

responsibilities (Zerfass et al., 2020). Noting that, the introduction of generative AI applications raises far-reaching questions that remain unanswered in the relevant literature. This is a recent phenomenon that has hardly been researched so far, especially in connection with communication agencies. New generative AI tools offer creative potential, enabling the creation of content in different media formats such as images, audio, video, text, and coding (Carter, 2023).

Subsequently, this results in a research gap, particularly in terms of the implications for the field of strategic communication. Conceivable disruptions to the services, scope of work, use of resources, and business models of communication agencies are emerging (Guarnaccia, 2023). In particular, the traditional pricing model, which is based on billing creative work at hourly rates, is being questioned in light of the efficient delivery of services by generative AI tools. The aim is to clarify whether new generative AI applications are being used and, if so, how communication agencies are adapting to the developments described.

The research will be conducted within the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework. The theoretical model, which has already been used in related studies on the introduction of AI in strategic communication (Zerfass et al., 2020), identifies three central influencing factors for innovation decisions in organizations: technology, organization, and environment (Baker, 2011). Generative AI can be seen as a competency-enhancing technology that can support employees and automate processes (Maragno et al., 2023). This study will focus specifically on the application of generative AI in communication agencies. Generative AI has the potential to transform various aspects of communication work, such as copywriting (Valin, 2018). However, current research mostly focuses on the use of (generative) AI in corporate communication (Valin, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to fill the identified research gap by investigating the use, client perspective, and associated strategy adjustments related to generative AI applications in communication agencies. Given the limited data available to date, an explorative approach is used to gain new insights. For this purpose, interviews were conducted with managers of German communication agencies, which were then analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. Based on this analysis, first hypotheses are derived, and the research questions are discussed.

The aim of this research project is to gain first empirical insights into the integration of generative AI applications in communication agencies. Based on the preliminary considerations outlined above, the following research leading question (RLQ) will be discussed: *How do communication agencies implement generative AI applications in their operational work, considering client perception, and how does this influence strategic adaptation?*

Theory

Technology-Organization-Environment Framework

The Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework can be used to explain the reasons why AI is or is not used. However, as this research is designed to be exploratory, the framework only serves as an initial orientation for investigating the use of generative AI applications in communication agencies. Generally, the framework states that the decision to introduce innovations in organizations is influenced by three different factors – technology, organization, and environment (Baker, 2011).

The technological context encompasses all existing or available technologies. This includes both internal technologies utilized within an organization and externally available technologies. The existing technologies serve as a framework for potential future innovations and the speed of their implementation within the company (DePietro et al., 1990). Therefore, the technological context serves as a foundation for determining the extent to which the introduction of AI is beneficial for a company (Maragno et al., 2023). Technologies can be divided into "competence-enhancing" and "competence-destroying" (Anderson & Tushman, 1986, p. 442) technologies. The former build on existing competencies and enable a gradual integration of the innovation into the company. In contrast, competence-reducing technologies replace existing knowledge and skills and render them obsolete. The innovation of generative AI must therefore be employed as a support for employees and as an automation aid to be classified as a competence-enhancing technology (Maragno et al., 2023).

The second factor included in this framework is the organizational context. It refers to organizational structures as well as the company's resources. These include employees, communication processes within the company, the size of the organization, and available but unused resources (Baker, 2011). Furthermore, internal characteristics such as informal relationships between employees are also part of the organizational context (DePietro et al., 1990). In addition, employees' attitudes towards innovation also play a central role. It is important to consider the concerns of employees regarding their abilities and their position within the company when implementing AI (Na et al., 2022). For the successful implementation of AI in organizations, it is essential that the innovation is known within the company, that appropriate technical skills and a necessary critical approach are in place, and that there is a certain level of trust in the technology (Maragno et al., 2023). Additionally, the presence of structures within the company that facilitate the observation of trends and developments in the organizational environment can be advantageous for future innovations (DePietro et al., 1990).

The environmental context encompasses industry structure, the regulatory environment, the presence of technology service providers, and the competition. In general, innovations are typically adapted more expeditiously in rapidly evolving industries (Baker, 2011). The attitude of competing companies plays a vital role, as do the prevailing competitive conditions

in terms of price, quality, and service. Pressure from competitors can result in accelerated implementation within one's own company (DePietro et al., 1990). Inaction may result in the loss of competitive advantage (Na et al., 2022). Government regulations are another factor in the environmental context. These can both promote and inhibit the establishment of innovations. A new technology like AI requires constant review of the current legal and ethical situation to ensure safe handling (Maragno et al., 2023). Consequently, these regulations can either impede or facilitate the implementation of AI in companies (Baker, 2011). In addition to the perspectives of employees within an organization, which were previously discussed in the context of organizational dynamics, the collective view of society influences the introduction of an innovation (Na et al., 2022). This factor should not be overlooked, particularly in the context of a highly debated technology such as AI. According to DePietro et al. (1990), influential companies can shape their own environment in their favor by influencing the competition. In conclusion, it can be stated that all three factors contain components that can either impede or facilitate the implementation of AI (Maragno et al., 2023).

Artificial Intelligence

AI as a subfield of computer science (Pannu, 2015) is not an entirely new phenomenon. The first scientific research in this field began as early as the mid-20th century. The Dartmouth Conference, which was first organized in 1955 under the name "Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence", is regarded as the birth of the term (Howard, 2019). At that time, the term AI was primarily used to describe systems that behaved intelligently and therefore in a human-like manner (Brynjolfsson, 2022).

Even today, AI is still characterized by its ability to imitate the human mind. It is regarded as a technology that enables systems to learn and make decisions with the goal to solve problems independently. In the context of this definition, AI is often divided into the categories of weak and strong AI (Li, 2022). While strong AI primarily refers to the approach of reproducing human intelligence in detail (Ng & Leung, 2020), the term weak AI applies to systems that fulfill a predefined task. These include AI-based applications such as speech recognition, text processing and generation as well as translations (Lu et al., 2020).

After the development of AI stagnated towards the middle of the 20th century the technology underwent rapid further development around the turn of the millennium. The starting point for this was primarily more powerful hardware and software as well as the immense accumulation of data (Big Data) (Li, 2022). As a result, many new technological concepts have been developed in recent years, particularly in machine and deep learning (Shinde & Shah, 2018), predictive analytics and natural language processing (Li, 2022). These concepts become important when they are understood as the basis for other forms of AI, such as generative AI (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023).

Generative AI, which forms the center of this research paper, describes an emerging sub-form of AI. The technology came into the public eye with the publication of the ChatGPT application by OpenAI in November 2022 (Julianto et al., 2023), which is considered a pioneer for a large number of AI tools that have appeared in recent months. Generative AI itself is primarily defined by the ability to independently create new content using data, statistics, and probabilities (Lv, 2023). This can be expressed in text form as well as in images, videos or spoken language (Aldausari et al., 2022).

In this context, it is important to differentiate between AI models and the AI applications considered in this paper. AI models are a machine learning architecture that uses AI algorithms to generate new data instances (Banh & Strobel, 2023). This category includes, for example, diffusion-probabilistic models that are used for image-text generation or classic language models (Large Language Models) such as *GPT-3*, *GPT-4* or *LaMDA*, which are used to create texts. These models serve as the basis for all AI applications. These in turn refer to the tools available to end users, such as *ChatGPT*, *DeepL Write* or *DALL-E 2*, which can be used to perform various tasks. Within those, both textual and visual content can be generated using work orders (Prompts) formulated in natural language (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023).

Communication Agencies

In the previous section, the origins and current development of generative AI were presented. AI permeates many areas in various forms and is of particular interest where it can be used to achieve new or more efficient solutions. In the following, communication agencies will be defined as an area that is relevant to the investigation of generative AI. The term communication agencies refers in this study to all organizations that provide communication services. According to Fuhrberg (2022), communication services are independent, marketable services in the areas of situation analysis, strategy (goals, reference groups, positioning, messages), tactical action, time and cost planning, implementation and evaluation/controlling. The definition of communication service providers in this study is based on their service portfolio, as the term *agency* is not legally protected (Fuhrberg, 2022). Therefore, all communication service providers that offer the services are included in this study, regardless of their naming, and are referred to as communication agencies or agencies.

The aforementioned heterogeneity of job titles and the increasing diversification of the agency market make it challenging to clearly define and structure the industry. This makes it difficult to get an overview of the sector: 64% of those responsible for communication in companies perceive the consulting industry as increasingly diversified and complex, and 60% of those surveyed also see difficulties in quality assurance (Zerfass et al., 2022). Orientation is provided by agency associations that ensure the performance quality of their members through admission criteria and strive for quality standards such as the Consultancy Management Standard of the International Communications Consultancy Organization (ICCO) (Gesellschaft

Public Relations Agenturen [GPRA], n.d.). Despite these efforts to organize the professional field, there are no reliable figures on the number of communication service providers in Germany.

Regarding the large number of task areas and the growing demand for professional communication, companies use agencies as communication consultants as well as for additional personnel resources, with the boundary between these becoming blurred in everyday life (Wiencierz et al., 2021). 65.9% of communication departments in Germany work with one or more agencies on an ongoing basis, while only 8.5% of organizations do not commission external agencies at all (Zerfass et al., 2015). The high demand and diverse competition are reflected in a rapidly changing environment (Wiencierz et al., 2021). As standing still is impossible, agencies present a high degree of adaptability as well as flexibility (Zerfass et al., 2017). In this challenging environment, communication agencies might be able to secure or gain their position as pioneers of new developments by keeping an open mindset to recent trends.

AI in Communication Agencies

As service providers in a highly competitive business field, it is highly relevant for communication agencies to deal with potential changes in the market and to integrate technological developments into everyday processes. However, the ECM 2022 shows that only 6.2% of communication departments and agencies have digitized their core activities and established an advanced use of CommTech (Zerfass et al., 2022). Currently, one topic from the technology sector has a particularly high profile: AI. With the rise of AI, communication agencies are faced with the question of whether and in which areas they want to implement AI, how to use it and what consequences its implementation could have. According to the Global CommTech Report of 2023, 43% of communication agencies surveyed worldwide stated that they intend to invest more in AI in the coming years (Bruce & Bailey, 2023). In order to assess generative AI's relevance for agencies, current research is limited due to the topic's novelty. Existing studies focus on general AI in communication, with generative AI receiving minimal attention. Prior research explores potential applications and related benefits/challenges of AI in communication (Zerfass et al., 2020).

For example, one important benefit is that AI applications can be used to analyze data in real time (Sufi & Khalil, 2023). Simultaneously, AI enables a significant reduction in complexity in the background research step. There are also initial research findings on the extent to which AI can prove beneficial in the conceptualisation of communication measures. The technology can be an advantage, especially within crisis scenario management, where generative AI can predict any outcome based on immense amounts of data and thus provide the basis for the development of promising measures (Seidenglanz & Baier, 2023).

However, in addition to the analysis phase, most potential applications of AI relate to the implementation phase, which is where generative AI comes into focus once again. The

technology, on which applications such as *ChatGPT* are based, enables an unprecedented type of text creation that could be used to automatically generate all types of content in the future (Seidenglanz & Baier, 2023). For now, the main conceivable areas of application are data-based communication activities such as the creation of financial reports (Zytnik & Lequick, 2023). However, more complex text tasks could also be implemented by machine in the future (Aspland, 2017). At the same time, generative AI can be used to adapt content to the language skills of different reference groups to increase the comprehensibility and transparency of communication (Seidenglanz & Baier, 2023). This aspect is also reinforced by AI-based translation programs (Valin, 2018).

If we summarize the studies to date, it becomes clear that, in addition to various possible uses of AI, there is also research into the possible effects of implementation. The presentation of positive effects is essential when you consider that new technologies only become established in practice if the companies using them expect to gain (competitive) advantages through their use. In this context, it is also referred to the increase in efficiency that can be realized through AI (Seidenglanz & Baier, 2023). At the same time, AI could enable an alternative use of time by shortening processing times and automating time-consuming routine tasks. This would allow communicators to concentrate on the creative aspects of their work in future (Valin, 2018). Moreover, employees would have more time for strategic activities (Seidenglanz & Baier, 2023) and tasks where analytical thinking is required (López et al., 2020). Finally, if we look at communication consultancies and agencies in isolation, generative AI offers a further opportunity. If companies recognize generative AI as a potential added value, the need for consulting within this technology will increase. For communication agencies, this could therefore lead to an expansion of the business field as well as an increase in order rate.

In addition to the potential benefits that the use of generative AI could have for companies active in the field of communication, the implementation of the technology also poses challenges, on which initial research results are also available. For example, there are technical risks that arise from the actual use of generative AI and the processing of AI-generated content. For generative AI this became apparent in inadequate data protection (Dobreva, 2019). In recent months, an increasing number of critical analyses of *ChatGPT* have been published, which show that confidential or personal data is contained in the training material of the AI application and thus harbors the risk of this data creeping into generated content (Borji, 2023). For user companies, this entails significant restrictions within a secure application. Dobreva (2019) points out the risks that the use of AI poses to the reputation of the companies using it. If communication materials such as press releases, posts for social media or financial reports are created automatically in the future, it remains questionable who is responsible for the consequences in the event of an error. To summarize, AI has long been a central aspect of corporate communication and has already undergone intensive research. In contrast,

however, the potential and application of generative AI technologies in the agency field remains comparatively unexplored, revealing a promising area for further insights. With disruption and innovative opportunities on the horizon, the question arises as to how these technologies could impact the traditional business models and working practices of communication agencies.

New generative AI tools have recently unlocked a wide range of creative potential, allowing content to be created in different media formats (Carter, 2023). These technological advances not only have far-reaching effects on the communication landscape in general, but also offer communication agencies a wide range of opportunities to further develop and diversify their services. The implications for the field of strategic communication are considerable, and potential disruptions are emerging in terms of the range of tasks, resource allocation and business models of communication agencies (Guarnaccia, 2023). In particular, the traditional pricing model based on the billing of creative work and hourly rates is increasingly being called into question in view of the efficient provision of services by generative AI tools. Regarding these developments, it seems essential to focus this research on the use of generative AI in communication agencies and the associated effects.

Methodology

Due to the limited empirical data available on the topic of this study, the issue is approached inductively using open research questions (Scholl, 2016). The implementation and use of generative AI applications is currently taking place in numerous fields. The communication agency sector was chosen as a specific field in order to narrow down the research interest, as there is currently little research available on this area of investigation.

Due to external expectations, communication agencies occupy a pioneering position in the integration of new developments and are therefore ideally suited for investigating the implementation of generative AI. As service providers, communication agencies are subject to the feedback and expectations of their clients. For this reason, the client perspective was also incorporated into the research leading question. The rapid developments in generative AI applications are likely to disrupt the current business field of communication agencies. It is therefore imperative to examine how communication agencies strategically position themselves against this backdrop. The following research leading question was ultimately derived from the preliminary considerations outlined above:

> RLQ: *How do communication agencies implement generative AI applications in their operational work, considering client perception, and how does this influence strategic adaptation?*

The aim of this research question is to examine the status quo of generative AI applications in communication agencies, to take client perceptions into account as well as to reflect the long-term positioning of communication agencies through strategic adaptations. Based on this a research and action basis for practical application will be created. Three research questions were derived from these dimensions to specify and structure the research leading question and thus contribute to answering it in a targeted manner.

RQ1: *How do communication agencies use generative AI applications in their opera- tional client work?*

RQ2: *How do client acceptance, perceptions and expectations influence the use of generative AI applications in communication agencies?*

RQ3: *How do agencies assess their strategy, their business model and the task profile of their consultants with regard to generative AI applications in the next five years?*

The first sub-question investigates to what extent and for which activities communication agencies use generative AI applications in their operational client work. As part of the second dimension, the perspective of clients and their influence on the use of generative AI applications in communication agencies is captured. The third question deals with the overarching changes that the implementation of generative AI applications entails for communication agencies. The aspects outlined for the individual sub-questions were incorporated into both the design of the guideline for the interviews and the development of the category system.

Due to the limited state of research on the integration of generative AI applications in communication agencies, this project required an explorative approach. As mentioned above, guided interviews were chosen, as this data collection method is suitable for explorative approaches. A total of 15 executives from communication agencies in Germany were interviewed. The population consisted of German communication service providers whose portfolio of tasks covers the communication services previously mentioned (Fuhrberg, 2022). The guided interviews were conducted via video conferencing between December 20, 2023, and January 30, 2024. A standardized guideline was used as the survey instrument. To adequately investigate the research leading question, the three sub-questions were used to derive the dimensions of the guideline. For an appropriate analysis, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts generated from the guided interviews were then analyzed using a content analysis according to Mayring (2015), as these are used to systematically analyze fixed communication such as texts and images.

Results

The following section will examine the results of the interviews regarding the research questions proposed. This is done based on the analysis of the use of generative AI applications, the client's perspective, and the future development of strategy and the business model of communication agencies.

Use of generative AI applications

The first research question *How do communication agencies use generative AI applications in operational client work?* can be answered with the help of the guided interviews conducted. The qualitative analysis of the interviews shows that the generative AI applications *ChatGPT* and *DeepL* are used most frequently in communication agencies. It can also be seen that various applications for image generation and editing such as *Midjourney* and *Adobe Firefly* are used. The introduction of ChatGPT was often seen as a catalyst for a comprehensive examination of generative AI applications. This is not least due to the media attention that the program received after its launch. The perception that the use of these technologies would create a competitive advantage also contributed to their introduction in communication agencies.

The analysis of category *C1_6 Areas of application* shows a broad range of uses for generative AI applications in communication agencies. These include the derivation of strategic programs such as communication strategies based on existing inputs as well as the development of core messages. Furthermore, generative AI is used in project management, in idea generation, and in the brainstorming process as well as in topic research. In this context, one interviewee emphasized the role of ChatGPT:

> We send out 600 to 700 posts every year. If you do that for a while, then at some point it becomes relatively difficult to somehow come up with new topics again. And that's where ChatGPT is a great way to get a different perspective on a topic that you may have already covered three times (I6 [translated]).

In the area of text work, generative AI applications are used to create press releases and social media posts, especially for platforms such as LinkedIn. There are also isolated approaches to automating processes holistically, such as responding to media and citizen inquiries. The applications are also used to check and optimize self-written texts.

The evaluation of the interviews shows that generative AI applications in communication agencies offer several advantages. The following section takes a closer look at the advantages perceived as crucial: efficiency, creativity, and quality. On the one hand, time savings can be attributed to the speed with which AI works. The technology offers an efficient solution for visualizing ideas or translating texts. On the other hand, saving time and effort is the second dimension of efficiency, which is increasingly mentioned in interviews. Here, it is emphasized

that extensive tasks such as writing press releases can be completed in less time. This enables employees to focus on the agency's core business and tasks that cannot be left to the AI. Negatively perceived tasks are often outsourced to AI.

Another key advantage is the promotion of creativity through generative AI applications. This extends across various dimensions, including the change of perspective and the generation of ideas. Moreover, the improvement in quality of the output content manifests itself in several aspects: First, the absence of errors is emphasized, especially in the generation of texts or translations. This reliability leads to an overall increase in the quality of the agency's output, according to one interviewee. In addition, there is less concern about making mistakes as the work can be reliably checked. Furthermore, the ability of AI to learn and adapt to the specific business context is emphasized.

Although generative AI applications in communication agencies offer numerous advantages, some perceived disadvantages were also discussed in the interviews. There were conflicting opinions on certain aspects: Some of the perceived disadvantages include susceptibility to errors and problems due to incorrect or outdated sources. It was also pointed out that certain skills, particularly in the area of prompting, are required as a prerequisite for meaningful results. In addition to these technical hurdles, data protection concerns were expressed. The need to enter sensitive data into the AI poses a potential risk, especially when using services from American companies such as OpenAI. Doubts were also raised regarding the lack of contextual reference and the difficulty of ensuring customization to specific client requirements.

The statements from all 15 interviews showed that generative AI applications are used along the entire value chain, both in strategic planning and in operational implementation and control. According to the interviewees, the applications are "actually used everywhere" (I8). At present, the focus is primarily on brainstorming and implementation. However, plans and initial use cases also include strategic planning, implementation and control as well as the holistic delegation of operational processes to generative AI applications. Based on the interviews, a potential connection between the implementation of generative AI applications in communication agencies and the profitability of the companies can be identified. All communication agencies use generative AI applications. Nevertheless, there are clear differences in approach, expertise, and implementation. One possible connection could lie in the increased employee satisfaction that results from the use of generative AI. Overall, these potential effects of the use of AI could help to increase the profitability of communication agencies. A corresponding hypothesis H1 can be formulated as follows:

H1: *The higher the degree of implementation of generative AI applications in the value chain of communication agencies, the more likely it is that companies will increase their profitability.*

Client acceptance, perceptions and expectations

After the analysis of the first research question has shown the usage behavior of communication agencies with regard to generative AI applications in operational client work, RQ2: *How do client acceptance, perceptions and expectations influence the use of generative AI applications in communication agencies?* will be answered. First of all, both positive and negative feedback from clients was surveyed in this area, which was recorded in the categories *C2_1 Positive client feedback* and *C2_2 Negative client feedback/concerns*. If the agencies have received feedback from clients, it is largely positive. Not only the content output is praised, but also the fact that the agencies have generally dealt with the topic and are able to use the tools. On the client side, there is a clear interest in the topic of generative AI.

Only one of the 15 interviewees reported negative feedback in terms of content (I3). In this context, a lack of brand identity in AI-generated texts and a lack of consistency with the client's tonality were criticized. However, according to I3, the points of criticism could always be attributed to a lack of content quality due to poor or incorrect prompting. Respondents were far more likely to report client concerns than negative feedback, particularly regarding data protection. This uncertainty is mostly due to a lack of knowledge about what happens to the data entered when using generative AI applications. The legal situation regarding the copyright of AI-generated content, which is not clearly defined in some cases, and the error-proneness of the generated output also led to concerns. Apart from the concerns mentioned, there was mostly no negative feedback from the agencies' clients.

The following section examines the results of category *C2_3 Client expectations*, which vary considerably. They range from no communicated expectations by the agency to specific requirements from the clients. It is primarily evident that very little expectations have been placed on the agencies to date, which means that there is no influence on the use of generative AI applications. The lack of expectations can be attributed to limited information about AI on the client side and general caution. In certain instances, there are no explicit expectations; instead, there is a mere interest and curiosity regarding the utilization of generative AI applications. Agencies as service providers must also be "two or three steps ahead of their clients, because they simply expect this consulting service from us" (I7 [translated]). In a few cases, specific expectations are placed on the agencies in the form of direct instructions. Here, it is pointed out that clients have different needs and requirements and that these should therefore be transferred to the use of generative AI applications. Consequently, specific areas of application and client preferences like data sensitivity must be negotiated directly with the client.

Regarding category *C2_3 Transparency*, the majority of respondents indicated that their agency manages the use of AI transparently. This is accomplished through specific instructions in advance, information in consultations, and labeling of AI. Transparency around AI is beneficial to show that the latest technology is being used and is also part of the trust that

has been built up with clients over many years. The fact that clients should not be misled was also mentioned in three interviews. Practical reasons for transparency include passing on (license) costs for AI tools to clients or costs that can be saved through AI, such as editing.

At the moment, many transparency issues are rendered superfluous by the fact that AI is only used as a support. The non-disclosure of the use of generative AI is justified by the fact that these programs are only one of many applications, and the use of AI as a search engine is becoming more common. Even if some agencies do not communicate every use of AI, they are transparent when asked by clients. Most agencies are transparent about the use of generative AI applications if a large part of the result was produced by AI. The results also make it clear that many of the agencies surveyed have not yet clearly regulated transparency in the use of generative AI. Transparency plays an important role in the legitimacy of communication agencies, especially as the possible use areas of generative AI expand. As more and more tasks are taken over by generative AI, companies may ask themselves what added value the commissioning of a communication agency still provides. As shown in the evaluation of the first research question, there is certainly concern among agency employees that they will be replaced by the technology. Future studies could investigate whether there is a connection between the fear of losing one's job and the transparency of the use of AI. A corresponding hypothesis H2 could be as follows:

H2: *The more employees in communication agencies see their jobs threatened by the use of generative AI, the less transparent they communicate it.*

Outlook on development of strategy and business model

Having previously presented client expectations and acceptance, the following section refers to RQ3: *How do agencies assess their strategy, their business model and the task profile of their consultants with regard to generative AI applications in the next five years?*

The respondents agreed on the disruptive nature of generative AI, as the use of different AI applications not only changes operational activities, but also has implications for the strategic orientation of communication agencies. However, most agencies have not yet developed a strategic plan for using AI. Including the technology in strategic planning is particularly difficult because the development of generative AI is challenging to predict. Nevertheless, nine interviewees emphasize that it is an ongoing, though not firmly formulated, goal to deal with generative AI. In this context, several interviewees refer to internal processes that serve their own further training and the establishment of task forces that are dedicated to the technology. Only two interviewees point out that their agencies have initially formulated a goal for the implementation of generative AI: the development of their own AI assistant. The aim is to develop a dedicated interface for ChatGPT that is always available to agency employees.

However, it is not possible to speak of a fixed strategy. Contrary to the other interviewees, I3 and I8 explain that the topic of generative AI has already been reflected in their agency's

strategy or will be integrated for 2025. "This year we are setting an annual target for the existing business and an annual target for the AI topic. Because that is simply such a high priority" (I8 [translated]). Even if generative AI already plays an important role in all communication agencies, long-term strategies are not yet recognisable. The main reason for this is the complexity of the topic, which makes it difficult to set actual milestones. Furthermore, it is important to develop realizable implementation paths and provide these with performance indicators to actually take generative AI into account in future strategy formulation.

Based on the evaluation, it seems useful to extend the analysis to a possible connection between the size of the agency and the integration of generative AI into their strategy. As explained, the complexity of the technology is the main reason for the low level of strategy formulation. However, this could be overcome through dedicated examination and processing of the topic. To realize this, communication agencies need human resources that deal with generative AI applications in addition to their day-to-day operational work. It can be assumed that this is more likely to pose problems for smaller communication agencies than those with a larger number of employees. A corresponding hypothesis H3, which requires further testing, could be formulated as follows:

H3: *The larger the number of employees a communication agency has, the more likely it is to have already integrated generative AI into its strategy.*

Regarding changes in the business model of the agency, six interviews stand out in which the interviewees emphasize that no changes to the corporate concept are planned to date. The other interviewees, who felt that an adjustment to the business concept was unavoidable, had opposing views of possible business model developments. In this context, the billing of the services of a communication agency will be particularly problematic in the future. Three interviewees agree that it will primarily be necessary to charge for work results rather than working hours. The reason for the interviewees' disagreement about the impact of generative AI on the business model could be that the actual influence cannot be assessed yet.

Regarding the development of the services and job profile of their employees, there is a consensus between the interviewees. Six participants state that consulting services are moving to the forefront for agencies, while classic operational tasks can be implemented automatically in the future. In addition, as new technology means a low level of expertise, the need for advice and applications in this area will increase, which could prove useful for agencies. Furthermore, six interviewees made it clear that an affinity for technology will be particularly in demand and that new positions will be created to work on and evolve generative AI. To manage the forthcoming change in tasks communicators will have to deal with appropriately, it is necessary to take a look at the future personnel structure of communication agencies. During the interviews seven respondents stated that they expect or are already observing that the use of generative AI will have an impact on the personnel structure, especially regarding activities

that are easy to automate. Contrary to these predictions, several interviewees see currently no future changes within the personnel structure of their agency. Holistically, although the effects of the technology are not yet reflected in the human resources, adjustments and savings could certainly be made in the future. Plans for collaborations and partnerships regarding generative AI are not ruled out by most interviewees since they would like to utilize external specialists or partnerships in the future.

Limitations

To be able to evaluate the results of the research, taking into account all limitations, a critical reflection of the methodological work and further research is undertaken at this point. The selection of the sample proved to be problematic in part, as not all managers had a comprehensive overview of the use of generative AI in the operational work of their agency. The interviewees who did not hold a management position were able to speak in this regard, but in some cases did not have sufficient insight into strategic planning to be able to fully answer the questions in category 1. Consequently, a more precise selection of the sample should be made to avoid asking questions that exceed the knowledge of the interviewees. Despite efforts to standardize the questionnaire it was not possible to guarantee that all questions were asked in the same way, as the interviews were conducted by five interviewers. Another limitation is the possible distortion of the answers due to looking-good tendencies. Interviewees try to present themselves and their agency as competently as possible (Brosius et al., 2022), which could have had an influence on the disclosure of the actual use of generative AI.

Since transcriptions are always reductive (Dresing & Pehl, 2020), it cannot be ruled out that information conveyed via body language, for example, is not included in the transcripts. When coding the interview transcripts, difficulties also became apparent regarding the categories *C3_2 Business model adaptation* and *C3_3 Service adaptation*. The two categories could not be clearly distinguished from each other because a company's service offering is a component of its business model. Furthermore, it is possible that the context was neglected in individual interview statements, even though the researchers were instructed to consult the context of ambiguous statements.

The present study was conducted exclusively with German communication agencies, which is why the findings can therefore only be related to agencies in Germany. As the sample was deliberately selected, the study does not claim to be representative of all communication agencies. Even if the findings presented here are only a snapshot, the study provides a good basis with an initial comprehensive overview to offer various starting points for future research work.

Conclusion and Outlook

The integration of generative AI applications in communication agencies represents a significant development that not only influences their operational work, but also client expectations, client acceptance and strategic orientation. Based on the theoretical foundations and the empirical findings of this study, the effects of this development on the industry can be examined in more detail.

The analysis of the data shows that generative AI applications are already being used by communication agencies along the entire value chain. This result can be theoretically substantiated with the help of the TOE framework. Communication agencies appear to have largely implemented the innovation of generative AI. Consequently, according to the research, AI is also seen as a competence-enhancing technology in practice (Maragno et al., 2023). Since all of the agencies studied use generative AI, it can therefore also be assumed that the organizational context and the environmental context favor and promote the introduction of this innovation. The widespread use of AI indicates that agencies are increasingly focusing on the efficiency and quality of this technology in order to achieve faster and better results. The use of AI as an aid to consultants' creativity is also aimed at this result, from which the operational work of an agency benefits significantly.

Client feedback and perception play a crucial role here, with the majority of feedback being positive, but concerns also being expressed about data protection and the accuracy of the output. Client expectations of the agencies range from non-existent to specific demands regarding the use of the service. Accordingly, it is not possible to derive a uniform picture. In terms of transparency, agencies only communicate the use of generative AI applications to their clients to a certain extent. They often only communicate openly if the AI has also taken on a substantial part of the task. Fundamentally, it should be noted that client perceptions can certainly have an influence on the use of AI. Feedback can have an encouraging effect on the decision of a communication agency to use AI. Less present is this influence on agencies on the part of clients regarding expectations and transparency.

It is also clear that the strategic adaptation of communication agencies to the use of generative AI applications is still in the development stage. While dealing with the technology is a high priority, a targeted orientation in its use is not yet clearly recognizable. However, it is expected that services and task profiles will change, with a shift from operational to strategic activities being predicted. This could also lead to a change in the personnel structure, with both new positions being created and savings being possible through automation. Accordingly, it is not yet possible to make any precise statements about how the implementation of AI will influence the business model and strategy of communication agencies. Overall, it can be stated that the degree of implementation of generative AI applications has a significant influence on

the operational work, the change in client perceptions and the strategic adaptation of communication agencies.

The results obtained in the study offer an initial approach to the scientific mapping of the use of generative AI in communication agencies. Due to the constant development of the technology, further research should revisit the topic soon to identify changes in the status quo of the industry or within the statements of the interviewees. In addition, subsequent studies should address the hypotheses derived in this study. In this way, quantitative projects can succeed in making representative statements about the relationships between the use of generative AI and profitability, the development of job profiles and intransparency, as well as the number of employees and strategy integration. In addition, a cross-national interpretation of future research can be undertaken to reflect the international status quo of usage.

The initial insights gained in the study provide an important basis for researching generative AI applications in communication agencies and for practical applications. Requirements, regulations, opportunities, and expectations are changing rapidly in the context of the dynamic development of the technology. Although generative AI is seen as a powerful tool for communication agencies in the future, its full potential can only be realized if agencies succeed in integrating different applications into everyday tasks. For communication agencies, it is of great importance now and in the future to develop skills in dealing with generative AI and to work on initial strategies and guidelines for its use.

For teaching and education, it is necessary to consider the ability to deal with generative AI as part of the education. The early integration of the technology at universities and colleges not only ensures that young communicators are prepared for the use of generative AI in their later working life, but also promotes the ability to evaluate and interpret machine-generated results. Collaboration with communication agencies or professional communicators is particularly useful here to promote the training of skills required in the future. The fact that the holistic use of AI as a tool represents the future of the industry is not only confirmed by the recent discourses mentioned in the introduction, but also by the results of this research work.

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Communication management 2.0

A qualitative survey on the effects of AIs on the competence portfolio in communication management

Christopher Buller, Sophia Koderer, Denise Kunz, Jule Schepers, Julia Stumpf

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Abstract

The ongoing digital transformation has a profound impact on corporate communications, underscoring the growing relevance of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This study examines the impact of AI development on the competency profile of communication managers. The research employs a cross-sectional design and involves 15 experienced communication managers in German companies undergoing both systematic surveys and qualitative, open-ended interviews. The findings reveal the current utilization of AI and the evolving perceptions of the role of communication managers. Notably, operational skills are becoming less significant in comparison to strategic acumen. However, operational tasks are still required, but in streamlined forms. Furthermore, the integration of AI has led to a redefinition of managerial roles, with the inclusion of correction, design, and AI integration responsibilities. It is of great importance to note that this integration necessitates a competency shift, which highlights the rising importance of skills in content creation, application, technology, and analysis. While the study highlights a recognizable shift in competencies, it also acknowledges the non-uniform AI implementation across companies. These insights provide a foundation for future research, enabling a nuanced understanding of evolving communication landscapes.
Keywords: digital transformation, Artificial Intelligence, communication managers, competency profile

Introduction

In today's digital era, Artificial Intelligence (AI) increasingly influences various aspects of daily life. From automated decision-making processes to personalized advertising, AI is already shaping society in multiple ways. AI's presence in the workplace is also ubiquitous, serving as an indispensable resource and effective tool across numerous professional areas (Zerfass et al., 2020). The expansion of AI into various professional areas, particularly communication management, has been transformative (Iaia et al., 2023). Communication managers now utilize AI to analyze large data sets, optimize communication strategies, and automate routine tasks, greatly influencing how they engage with their audiences (Toteva, 2023). The role of AI redefines from a mere tool to a strategic asset in communication management

(Holmlund et al., 2020). The application of AI has expanded beyond traditional fields and is increasingly used in communication management (Osei-Mensah, 2023).

Historically, communication managers were primarily responsible for developing messages and choosing the right communication channels (Zerfass & Volk, 2020). However, their role has broadened to include the implementation and monitoring of AI-driven technologies. This shift reflects the onset of a new era where AI is not seen as a supportive tool but as a key driver of a company's communication strategy (Zerfass et al., 2020).

The current research in this area shows an increasing engagement with the topic of digitalization in communication management. However, little research specifically addresses AI's impact on the roles and tasks of communication managers (Zerfass et al., 2020). This study fills this gap by providing detailed insights into the changes resulting from the integration of AI. The methodology of this project includes a qualitative analysis involving expert interviews to gain insights into the practical application of AI in communication management. The total population comprises communication managers from various industries and companies, offering a wide diversity of perspectives and experiences. Throughout this work, various aspects are outlined that aim to contribute to developing a comprehensive understanding of the topic and providing guidance for further research and practical applications. This paper aims to examine the extent to which the competency profile of communication managers is influenced by the development of Artificial Intelligence in companies.

The influence of AI on the professional profile of communication managers is a complex phenomenon that affects traditional tasks and responsibilities and introduces new demands and competencies. Therefore, it is crucial to thoroughly examine this change to understand its impacts on the practical work of communication managers and to develop appropriate measures for adapting and advancing their skills. By exploring this topic, the project can expand scientific knowledge and derive concrete recommendations for companies to successfully meet the challenges and opportunities associated with the use of AI. This paper seeks to explore the extent to which the competency profile of communication managers is impacted by the integration and advancement of Artificial Intelligence within corporate environments, encapsulating the research leading question:

RLQ: *How does the evolution of Artificial Intelligence in businesses influence the competency profile of communication managers?*

Theory

Business and communication management

Communication management is the control and design of communication activities and processes that contribute to value creation in organizational contexts through planning,

organization, management and control (Zerfass & Dühring, 2022; Zerfass & Link, 2022). Communication managers are those "who deal with the management and implementation of controlled communication processes between organizations (companies, associations, authorities, non-profit organizations, etc.) and their respective stakeholders. [...] Corresponding persons can be found in the communication departments of companies" (Zerfass & Dühring, 2014, p. 164). Due to the increasing relevance of involving other stakeholders besides a company's shareholders, value-based management and the associated increase in stakeholder value is becoming more and more important (Freeman & Reed, 1983; Zerfass, 2021). Strategic decisions, as described by Zerfass (2021), focus on defining corporate goals and utilizing existing potential. Operational decisions, as outlined by Schreyögg and Koch (2020), choose the right means to achieve these goals while taking into account efficiency for all stakeholders. Zerfass (2021) assigns certain corporate communication activities to the dimensions of strategic and operational management as well as the economic and social dimensions. Strategic-economic activities such as investor relations and corporate branding stand alongside strategic communication, while stakeholder dialogs and lobbying fall into the strategic-social dimension. Reputation management and corporate listening act as interfaces between the two dimensions. The operational dimension includes activities such as product advertising and employee communication, which fall into the economic dimension, as well as CSR communication and sponsoring, which fall into the social dimension. Crisis communication is located between the two dimensions, while employer branding is integrated into the economic dimension both strategically and operationally.

The 2016 European Communication Monitor (ECM) study also looked at the activities of communication managers that characterize their daily work. The first point is setting organizational goals, monitoring public issues and stakeholder expectations, discussing visions and business strategies with management and other departments, developing scenarios and building legitimacy, which accounts for around 18.8% of the day-to-day work of communication managers. Operational communication, talking to colleagues and journalists, writing press releases and texts for print and online media, creating communication materials, monitoring the results of activities and organizing events, accounts for a considerable 36.2%. Equally important is the management of communication activities and staff, including planning, organization, personnel management, budgeting, evaluation of processes and strategies, which accounts for 27.8%. In addition, communication work includes coaching, training, advising and empowering members of the organization or clients on vision, mission and other communication-related topics, as well as improving their communication skills and preparing them to communicate with the media and stakeholders accounting for 17.2%. There is an increasing focus on strategic activities, while operational tasks remain relevant and make up a significant part of the daily work of communication managers. (ECM, 2016)

The development of the competence portfolio of communication managers

Communication management studies focus on core competencies, skills, and roles of communication managers. Communication managers are considered competent if they not only have the ability to solve problems, but also demonstrate the willingness and are authorized to act on behalf of others (Kiesenbauer, 2022). Competencies, according to Tench and Moreno (2015), arise from a mix of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that are used to deliver performance. According to Dozier and Broom (1995), roles are created and describe organizational behavior and its consequences. Identifying roles is critical to understand the effective elements of the profession (Tench & Moreno, 2015). In contrast to roles, competencies remain more stable over time and are fundamental to task performance (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011).

The ECOPSI project (European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation Program) is a research project by Tench et al. (2013) to investigate the skills of communication professionals in Europe. Four pre-defined roles were examined: The role of CCOs, crisis communication managers, internal communication managers, and social media managers. The competence and role profile of the four roles was recorded using the competence classification of the ECOPSI communication role matrix (Tench & Moreno, 2015). The communication role matrix, developed by Tench et al. (2013), outlines six competencies and associated skills for four roles. It identifies key qualifications for communication managers, including social empathy, message effectiveness, organizational research skills, and knowledge of society and stakeholders (ECM 2023; Tench et al., 2017).

The Communication Management Grid by Volk et al. (2017) comprises eight core roles that map strategic and operational capabilities. Strategic capabilities secure the company's positioning and define the scope for future success, while operational capabilities support the implementation of communication strategies (Zerfass & Volk, 2019).

The strategic role of the ambassadors involves representation and securing fundamental positioning, requiring skills like mediation and leadership, with empathy and charisma being essential traits (Zerfass & Volk, 2019). In the ECOPSI project by Tench et al. (2013), the supporting and guiding core competency aligns closely with these skills, encompassing communication of vision, standards, ethical guidelines, and developing others. Multipliers support the implementation of communication strategies, ensuring stakeholder understanding of company goals, utilizing editorial and communication skills. Their role falls within the operational dimension (Zerfass & Volk, 2019). Communication strategists align communication activities with long-term corporate strategy, emphasizing analytical skills and strategic understanding. They require deep knowledge of public opinion, industry, and company specifics (Zerfass & Volk, 2019). The management core competency, encompassing cross-functional awareness and business-focused skills, aligns with this role (Tench et al., 2013). Professional communicators

execute goals set by communication strategists, requiring editorial, communication, and creative skills, along with cross-media expertise (Zerfass & Volk, 2019). This operational role involves disseminating messages through various channels and aligns with core competencies such as service provision and creation, including writing, designing, and presenting skills (Tench et al., 2013).

Strategic managers focus on long-term development opportunities like Big Data and AI, and oversee employee and manager skill management, needing strategic management skills. Operational managers handle day-to-day business, including budgeting and performance measurement, requiring leadership and people management skills (Zerfass & Volk, 2019). This aligns with the organizing and implementing core competency from the ECOPSI project, encompassing planning and implementation skills, as well as the analyzing and interpreting competency (Tench et al., 2013). Consultants assist top management in identifying and addressing communicative risks, requiring specialist knowledge and consulting skills. Coaches facilitate professional communication for managers and employees, necessitating mediation, feedback, and media competence (Zerfass & Volk, 2019). These roles align with the consulting function emphasized by Zerfass and Franke (2013), which includes process and expert consulting. Coaching and counseling, as identified by Tench et al. (2013), overlap with relationship building, consistent with the ECM 2021, which highlights a strong correlation between ambassadors and consultants. Therefore, communication managers often fulfill both roles. According to the ECM 2023, the role of advisor will become increasingly important for companies, and it is predicted that there will be many new opportunities to fulfill this role within companies.

The ECM 2021 identifies five roles (communicator, coach, consultant, manager, and ambassador) based on the Communication Management Grid. These roles are categorized as outbound (communicator and ambassador) and inbound (coach and consultant), referring respectively to external stakeholders and internal support. The study reveals that many communication managers take on multiple roles simultaneously, with the communicator role being the most common (42.8%), followed closely by the manager role (31.1%). Around 25% of practitioners perform coaching and consulting roles.The fast-evolving communication landscape, marked by digitization, Big Data, and advanced AI technologies, requires research into the roles and skills of communication managers. (ECM, 2021)

Lee and Meng (2021) stress the importance of cognitive analytics, data management, technical proficiency, and the ability to create meaning in the digital transformation context. Employees must acquire these skills to adapt to the transformative potential of digitization and AI. While 70% of European communication managers acknowledge the importance of business, technology, and data competencies, significant skill gaps exist, with 32.2% lacking adequate skills and 18.4% critically underqualified in data competencies. Additionally, about 44.4% are deemed inadequately qualified in technological skills. Addressing these competency gaps

through training is crucial for the field's advancement, with a need for prioritizing continuing education tailored to professionals' competency levels. Training priorities vary among organizations and age groups, with younger professionals typically dedicating more time to continuing education. (ECM, 2023)

Artificial Intelligence and Communication Management

Communication management must address changes in the corporate environment, and digitalization significantly shapes how companies communicate with their stakeholders (Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2023). Given the deluge of information, competitive pressures, volatility, and changed network structures, companies will increasingly need to rely on digital tools such as automation and Artificial Intelligence to adequately respond to changing circumstances (Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2023). Therefore, corporate communication is directly affected by current technological changes. One approach to addressing this challenge is the integration of AI into corporate communication (Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2023).

Artificial Intelligence is understood as the ability of a system to interpret external data accurately, learn from this data, and adapt it flexibly to achieve specific goals and tasks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Due to technological changes, communication departments within organizations must continuously adapt to keep pace, needing a "targeted use of digital technologies" (Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2023, p. 26). These technologies, including AI applications, support PR and communication units and are collectively known as communication technology (CommTech) (Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2023), a term introduced by the Arthur W. Page Society in 2019 and popularized in Europe by ECM 2021. CommTech encompasses digital technologies for both primary activities — such as stakeholder communication and consulting tools — and function-specific supporting activities like strategic alignment and digital asset management, all aimed at enhancing the value and efficiency of communication strategies (Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2023). While communication units can independently manage CommTech tools, they have no control over the organization-wide supporting technologies referred to as "OrgTech" (Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2023, p. 32).

The integration of AI applications like ChatGPT is a strategic move for companies to align their communication with the evolving demands of digital transformation and effectively respond to these challenges (Karakose et al., 2023). Utilizing such technologies enhances the adaptability of communication strategies, allowing companies to better meet the changing needs of their stakeholders (Spajić et al., 2023). However, it appears that few organizations have implemented AI in their communication departments (Zerfass et al., 2020). AI also significantly impacts data analysis, enabling communication managers to gain insights for real-time trend identification and response, precise audience segmentation, and the creation of personalized communication that strengthens stakeholder engagement (Jhaveri et al., 2023).

The rapid digitalization of communication has dramatically increased the speed and volume of information, presenting significant challenges in managing dynamic and expanding stakeholder relationships. Awareness of Artificial Intelligence among communication managers has grown significantly, from less than a third in 2019 believing in its substantial impact (ECM, 2019) to over two-thirds in 2023 (ECM, 2023). The shift towards Corporate Communication 4.0 and stakeholder management needs a re-evaluation of resource distribution within corporate communication. Despite the accessibility of AI through advanced, often free tools, its integration requires more than basic application; it demands a holistic approach including strategic training, digital mindset cultivation, data security, procurement navigation, and change management. Successfully implementing AI involves a continuous learning curve and a deeper understanding of its potential to transform stakeholder engagement, indicating that effective AI implementation is complex and requires a firm commitment to digital communication technologies. Such thorough management allows communication departments to reshape their strategic contributions and drive the organization's digital transformation (Bhima et al., 2023).

Methodology

This chapter outlines the research-guiding question, research questions, methods, unit of analysis, instruments, and timeline.

Research-guiding question and research questions

The transformation of the work environment, largely driven by technological advances such as AI, is creating new challenges for organizations. A critical aspect of this evolution is corporate communications, which plays a key role in adapting to changing conditions by facilitating stakeholder exchanges and influencing the flow of information. In the face of hyper-competition and information overload in various communication arenas, effective corporate communications is essential for successful positioning in the digital age. Despite its importance, research on the impact of AI on the competency profiles of communication managers is lacking. (Zerfass, Hagelstein, & Tench, 2020) This project aims to contribute to a better understanding of the changing role models, skills and competencies of communication managers due to AI. Therefore, the following research-guiding question (RGQ) is posed for this study:

RLQ: *How does the evolution of Artificial Intelligence in businesses influence the competency profile of communication managers?*

To comprehensively address the RLQ, the following research questions (RQs) were developed:

RQ1: *What specific AI applications and technologies are currently being used in communication management and how do they support communication managers in their tasks?*

RQ2: *To what extent are the role perceptions and job profiles of communication managers evolving as a result of AI integration within organizations?*

RQ3: *What specific competencies are needed now and in the future to effectively address the challenges and opportunities arising from the influence of AI?*

The objective of this research is to gain insight into the current practices and challenges of communication management in the context of AI, as well as to identify the skills and knowledge that future communication managers will require for success.

Methods

The research questions were explored through a cross-sectional study and qualitative open-ended guided interviews. Using an inductive approach, findings were derived directly from interviews. Respondents were selected using a quota sample based on a deductive approach. Qualitative content analysis according to Mayring and Brunner (2009) was used to evaluate the guided interviews, where categories were formed inductively. Communication managers from companies in Germany were the unit of analysis. The sample included 15 participants from companies with at least 40 employees. The selection criteria focused on managerial positions. The participants represented a variety of industries, as shown in table 1. The sample consisted of ten female and five male participants. The average age was 39 and the average years of experience was 13. The companies ranged in size from 40 to 273,000 employees.

Table 1

Overview of the analysis unit

Industry sector	Title/position	Size of the team (in persons)
Financial services	Junior brand manager	12
Chemicals	Manager Employer Branding	10
Waste disposal and re-cycling	Press spokesperson & head of press de-partment	4
Financial Services	Communications Manager	12
Telecommunications	VP Communication, Strategy & Develop-ment	10
Information Technology	Lead Communication & Change Market-2-Cash	7
Information Technology	Internal Communication Manager	1
Insurance	Specialist Marketing Communication	51
Consulting	Specialist Internal Communication	13
Intralogistics	Director Global Marketing and Communica-tion	7
Metrology	Executive Vice President Human Re-sources	3
Trade fair and event man-agement	Head of digital communication department	11
Software company	Head of Marketing/ Customer Centricity	5
Consumer Goods	Junior Brand Manager	15
Auditing	Communications Manager	6

Instruments and Timeline

Prior to the interviews, participants received a briefing that included information about the study, a definition of AI, the interview process, and a privacy agreement. An interview guide was developed to provide a structured basis for the interviews. It included an introduction, an icebreaker question, twelve specific questions to address the research questions, and demo-graphic questions. The introduction set the context of the study and emphasized data confi-dentiality. A question about personal enjoyment of work lightened the tone. To answer RQ1, the first four questions covered the current use of AI, the resulting internal discussions, the

acceptance of AI applications in the team, and integration challenges. For RQ2, the next four questions focused on the manager's daily tasks, the impact of AI on internal and external communications, changes in the understanding of communication manager's roles, and their involvement in implementing AI in their departments. To answer RQ3, the last four questions collected information on how they deal with AI, what skills they consider crucial, and what expectations they have for mastering AI applications. Expectations regarding the future impact of AI on communication management and preparations for future requirements were also addressed. Demographic questions covered age, gender, years of work experience, and team size. Interviews were conducted and recorded online using *ZOOM* and *Microsoft Teams*. Transcripts were created using transcription tools and analyzed using *MAXQDA 2024*. The study took four months, from November 2023 to February 2024. Participants were recruited in November 2023. Interviews took place from December 2023 to January 2024 and lasted a maximum of 90 minutes each. Data were transcribed and analyzed in February 2024.

Results

Use of AI in communication management

The first research question asks which AI applications and technologies are used in communication management and in which task areas they support communication managers. A total of 56 text passages were coded under the category of AI applications used, which can be summarized in five codes. The communication managers use *text AIs, design AIs, translation AIs, language AIs* and *network AIs.* All interviewees use at least one AI tool, and most even use more than one tool. It is concluded that AIs have already become part of everyday communication management, even if implementation is still in its infancy. Twenty times in total, and therefore most frequently *text AIs* were mentioned, with *ChatGPT* AI being mentioned first and foremost. In addition, *text AIs* based on ChatGPT software but integrated into an internal company program were also described. This shows that socially popular AI tools such as ChatGPT are increasingly being used and further developed using the software for corporate purposes. In addition to *text AIs, translation AIs* are also used by eleven respondents and thus also by a majority. The tool *DeepL* was brought up particularly frequently. It can be interpreted that well-known and widely used tools are used more rapid in communication management. Although *design AIs* came up 14 times, only six people used them. It is noticeable that established programs with integrated AI technology, such as *Photoshop* or *Canva* are referred to the most. This indicates that the development of autonomous AIs in design has yet to reach a stage where they can be meaningfully used in communication management. *Voice AIs* and *network AIs* are not yet used as extensively as the previously mentioned ones. Based on the company

data, it can be interpreted that companies from the IT sector or with access to high human and financial resources are already further along than other companies.

Six codes with 56 text passages that deal with the use of AI emerged from the transcripts. When it comes to the tasks that the communication managers surveyed perform with the support of AI tools, it quickly becomes clear that the AIs mentioned are mainly used to create communication products and facilitate operational tasks. The *translation of texts* (17 mentions) and *text creation* (20 mentions) stand out. The interviewees explained that not only standardized texts, but more sophisticated products are created with the help of AI. I6 describes: "What I also like to use, sometimes standard responses to emails, having them prescribed to me and then just adapting them" (I6 [translated]). Moreover, I5 explains that AI support also becomes relevant "when creating speeches, mainly at board level" (I5 [translated]). Therefore, AI is not only used for lower-level activities. The codes primarily refer to operational skills, which is why it can be concluded that AIs are used in operational activities the most and increasingly support communication managers in these activities. It is interesting to note here that it was frequently emphasized that AIs never create the final version, but that the products always must be finally checked. Trust in AI, both in the review of texts and in the creation of such texts, is not as high as in humans with specialist knowledge. That can lead to the conclusion that activities and skills still need to be eliminated, as specialist knowledge is still required to check products. However, operational tasks such as design, text creation, and research tasks are less time-consuming and can be greatly supported by AI.

As the communication managers surveyed are embedded in a social environment in their work, we also investigated how the atmosphere and mood regarding Artificial Intelligence are currently perceived in the respective departments. Five codes were developed, and 65 text passages were coded. *Negative attitudes towards AI* were only mentioned three times. It was primarily stated here that some individuals have a negative attitude towards the new developments, not that a collective negative attitude prevails. With 18 mentions, *positive attitudes* predominate here. In addition to the positive characteristics, a relatively *neutral atmosphere* was mentioned 13 times, with a certain openness and curiosity being perceived. However, ten people also reported that they perceived a *diversity of opinions towards AI technologies* (20 mentions). As no interviewee perceived an exclusively negative mood, it can be assumed that opinions regarding AI are not yet firmly established and are still evolving. A perceived uncertainty towards using Artificial Intelligence was also mentioned eleven times, indicating that opinions towards AI still need to be fully consolidated.

It should be addressed in these results that the departments or teams in which the respondents operate are permanently embedded in the respective companies. For this reason, internal communication on AI topics within the companies was also examined. This category aimed to find out at which points in the company which AI topics are already being used. Seven

codes with 69 text passages were generated from the transcripts. The *topic of user behavior* was mentioned most frequently (18 mentions). Eight people described conversations within the company when discussing *how the technologies and tools can and should be used*. Respondents also frequently cited *concerns and worries* about AI technologies (16 mentions) as triggers for AI-centered conversations within the company. Both of the frequently mentioned codes illustrate that the respondents' companies still need to be sure about the use of AI technologies but that employees are willing to discuss the possibilities and consequences of AIs. In addition to these topics, it became clear that AI is mainly discussed in the context of *training and further education* (13 mentions). Following on from the existing uncertainty, this code shows that the discussion and responsible use of AI technologies are also relevant for higher management levels when they offer training on the topic. *AI departments* (three mentions), *AI policy* (five mentions), and *AI as part of the corporate strategy* (one mention) are mentioned less frequently. Nevertheless, the topic of AI is also being discussed at a high level and is increasingly being incorporated into the activities and actions of companies.

The codes and categories presented can be used to answer the first research question. Several different types of AI tools are already being used in communications management. However, text AIs, particularly the ChatGPT tool, are mentioned frequently. Building on the capabilities of these widely used AIs, the technologies primarily support activities such as text creation, text translation or the design of various communication products. It is, therefore, mainly AIs that support operational activities and make those more efficient. It should be noted that the use of and attitudes towards AIs are still very diverse and varied. The results prompt the formulation of the following initial hypothesis.

H1: *The utilization of AI has a favorable influence on the quality and duration of operational activities in communication management.*

Role perception and job profile

In order to address the second research question, the participants were asked to provide their perceptions regarding the influence of AI, the change in their own role perception, and the activities they perform on a daily basis. In the 15 interviews, the influence of AI was more often described as either *low* or *high*, with the majority of respondents indicating that the influence was *low*. 12 of the participants rated the influence of AI as rather *low* at least once, while eight rated it as rather *high* at least once. Five respondents provided contradictory responses at least once. This discrepancy may be attributed to the fact that the change is not actively perceived, organizational changes or technological developments are perceived with a time lag, or that the interviewees may utilize the support of AI without explicitly perceiving or acknowledging it as such. It is crucial to engage in self-reflection regarding one's own approach to work and to recognize AI as a supportive element. This is essential for a realistic perception.

An alternative hypothesis is that AI is not transforming communication management, but rather reinforcing existing developments.

The following section presents the identified roles and classifies the associated findings in the literature. The role of the *corrector* is the most frequently mentioned, with 13 mentions. This role has not yet been identified in previous studies. In light of the growing influence of AI, communication managers are increasingly tasked with the role of a *corrector*, with a particular focus on content created by AI. On the one hand, the role of the *corrector* includes quality control, whereby the manager ensures that the content generated by AI meets the quality standards that apply to the company's communication goals and guidelines. This may entail the identification and rectification of errors, inaccuracies, or inappropriate content in order to ensure the maintenance of certain quality standards in communication. The primary responsibility of the *corrector* is to conduct a plausibility check. Furthermore, the *corrector* is responsible for ensuring the coherence and consistency of AI-generated content.

The role of the *strategic manager*, as defined in Chapter two, was referenced nine times by the interviewees. This role includes the identification of long-term development opportunities. One-third of respondents perceive themselves as increasingly *innovators* within the company due to the rapid development of AI. "The expectation of the communications team is to integrate AI," states one respondent (I15 [translated]). The interviewees perceive themselves not only as reactive to the developments of AI, but rather as proactive designers and integrators of this technology in corporate communications. This underscores the significance of an inclination towards innovation and the capacity to integrate novel technologies into the communication strategy as indispensable competencies for communication managers in a rapidly evolving environment, influenced by the advent of AI. One-fifth of the interviewees indicated that AI has a positive impact on the existing understanding of the role of *consultant* as defined in chapter two. AI could automate operational tasks and perform data analysis, allowing strategic advisors to focus on higher-value tasks such as strategic consulting and active participation in decision-making processes. Due to the rapid pace of AI developments, communication managers have the task of advising internal groups within the company and supporting them in the implementation of AI applications and appropriate implementation strategies. This task is mentioned by a third of the respondents and describes the role of the *coach*, which was also defined in chapter two. The role of the *professional communicato*r introduced in chapter two has been mentioned once in relation to the influence of AI.

The roles described above exemplify the day-to-day work of communication managers, encompassing specific activities that can be divided into four core activities by the ECM (2016). An indispensable core activity is the alignment of communication with customers and stakeholders (ECM, 2016). Three individuals prioritize the *development of strategic communication plans*, while two others prioritize the *automation of communication processes*. Fewer than 20%

of respondents indicated that they consider strategic or technological aspects on a daily basis in order to ensure the effectiveness of communication. Another core activity is operational communication. The activities of *crisis communication* and *customer contact* are each mentioned by one individual. Two individuals are engaged in *event planning*, while three are involved in *research activities*. The *analysis* and *further development of communication channels* were each mentioned by four individuals. Eight interviewees indicated that they perform *text work* on a daily basis, which was mentioned a total of 13 times. The frequency of *text work* indicates that it is a more intensive activity than other activities. This may be due to the importance of AI for increasing efficiency. The core activity of managing communication activities and employees encompasses *project management*, *process management*, *knowledge management*, and *administration*. Each of these areas was mentioned by one respondent. Three individuals are engaged in *editorial planning*, while four are involved in daily *support*. The *coordination* of activities was mentioned a total of 15 times by nine individuals, indicating a higher intensity compared to other activities. The fourth core activity of ECM (2016) encompasses coaching, training, consulting, and the empowerment of both the organization and its customers. A third of respondents mentioned *consulting* a total of seven times.

The results show that AI does not have a significant impact on the activities of communication managers. This could indicate that the capabilities of AI in communication management do not replace human expertise, but only weight it differently. Human interaction and creative decision-making remain essential. Empirical data shows that AI is changing the perception of the role of communication managers. A new role, the "corrector", has emerged to ensure the quality and coherence of AI-generated content.

H2: *In the context of AI, communication managers assume the role of corrector.*

Competencies

The following section presents the results of the third research question, which was to determine which specific competencies are required of communication managers due to the influence of AI. The ability to empathize is essential for AI to be sensitized. Communication managers must possess *empathy* and be able to empathize with their target groups. *Empathy* is referenced on three occasions throughout the interviews. *Empathy* is a crucial skill that falls under the category of social and empathic skills, as defined by Tench et al. (2017). *Empathy* is of particular importance in the role of the coach, who provides guidance to internal company groups on AI and supports the implementation of AI applications and suitable strategies. The competence of *targeted communication* involves creating clear and consistent messages for the right audience at the right time. This encompasses the strategic selection of content, channels, and timing to interact effectively and consistently with communication objectives. A third of respondents consider *targeted communication* to be essential, for example, to introduce AI to employees. *Targeted communication* can be considered a core competence of service

provision and creation, which is primarily required by the role of professional communicators (Tench et al., 2017). The *content competence*, which was mentioned on 11 occasions by the interviewees, can also be assigned to the core competence of service provision and creation (Tench et al., 2017). It describes the ability of managers to differentiate content and categorize it according to importance. In addition, they must possess an understanding of their own work and that of the company, as well as a general understanding of strategic communication. It is imperative that communication managers possess an understanding of the capabilities and limitations of AI, as well as the strategies for effectively engaging with AI to achieve desired outcomes. This competence is initially required of professional communicators who are responsible for performance and creation.

Furthermore, the *content competence* can be extended to the role of the corrector, who is responsible for checking the content of the AI for correctness and coherence. Seven of the interviewees discussed the necessity of *technical competence* in the context of AI, which encompasses the capacity to comprehend AI technologies and integrate them into communication strategies. This encompasses the ability to comprehend user interfaces, adjust settings, and utilize the full range of functions to achieve communication objectives. It can be attributed to the domain of organizing and implementing. Furthermore, *application competence* is also required. This refers to the appropriate application of AI. In the future, communication managers will be expected to possess the requisite knowledge and skills to utilize AI in an appropriate manner, thereby ensuring its effective and efficient deployment. *Analytical competence* can be considered a core competence of analyzing and interpreting, although it is also a requisite for operational managers (Tench et al., 2017). This entails comprehending and dissecting intricate data, thereby extracting meaningful insights. This encompasses the capacity to examine data in a critical manner, discern patterns, and formulate well-founded conclusions. As the competence most frequently cited in conjunction with AI, communication management has emerged as a crucial skill.

Finally, the presentation of the results addresses the competencies that respondents believe are required for dealing with AI in communication management. This comparison reveals changes in the competence profile compared to the previously developed literature basis. As a consequence of the growing prevalence of AI in communication management, the importance of *content competence*, *application competence*, *analytical competence*, and *technical competence* is increasing. This leads to the assumption that roles are linked to competencies and the introduction of new roles could require new skills or reassess the relevance of previously less important skills. This results in the following hypothesis.

H3: *The use of AI in communication management increases the relevance of analysis, content, application and technical competence of communication managers.*

Limitations

Various influences at different times limited the project. The methodological criticism and limitations listed below must be considered when interpreting and understanding the results presented. The chosen methods of guided interviews and qualitative content analysis are characterized by subjectivity. The predefined guidelines are intended to counteract any bias by the researchers during the interview. Due to the literature review phase, there is nevertheless a certain degree of expectation on the part of the researchers in the interviews, which can lead to a bias in one response direction. Although the predesigned guideline could counteract a certain subjectivity, it also limited the researchers to some extent, as interesting points were not addressed in depth. Another disadvantage of qualitative guided interviews is that the interviewees can be influenced by the fact that they represent a company despite the anonymity of the survey and respond accordingly. Social desirability can also be a problem in interviews. An attempt was made to counteract this by emphasizing in the interview introduction that there are neither right nor wrong answers and that personal impressions and experiences count. When conducting the interviews, it became clear that the interviewees only sometimes adopted the understanding of roles that emerged from the scientific literature. A more detailed briefing during the interview could have counteracted this. One criticism of the guidelines is that the questions were sometimes built on each other, and the interviewees repeated themselves and explained things several times. Due to the small sample size, the project needs more generalizability. This is exacerbated by the fact that the communication managers surveyed work in different sectors and management levels. The differences between the companies' sectors were not the focus of the study. On closer inspection, however, these differences could provide essential insights. The interviews were partly limited by the fact that the interviewees needed more knowledge about the attitude towards AI technologies within the companies. The younger interviewees sometimes found it challenging to recognize how roles and competencies are changing, as developments in AI and digitalization have occurred since they started their careers. It is sometimes difficult to draw comparisons between before and with AI.

A mutual check between the researchers could uncover differences in interpretation. However, complete intercoder reliability cannot be guaranteed. The coding was carried out by the researchers one after the other, which may mean that the results of the previous researcher influenced the coding. Time constraints also limited content analysis and evaluation. Several rounds of coding could have resulted in higher code quality. All interviews were conducted online due to time constraints. In contrast to face-to-face interviews, the online format has some areas for improvement, such as technical challenges, the lack of facial expressions and gestures, and a certain reticence. Due to the research questions formulated at the start of the project, the concepts of roles and competencies were initially considered separately in the evaluation. However, they are interconnected complexes. An early combination of the two

could have provided more precise information. In principle, the concepts of roles, competencies, characteristics and skills cannot be separated. Accordingly, the codes and categories could be more clear-cut.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study summarizes key findings and offers insights into future trends concerning the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the field of communication management. The research aims to explore how AI is reshaping the roles and competencies of communication managers as they adapt to rapid technological advancements. AI's integration into communication management is transforming how businesses interact with their audiences and affecting the duties and responsibilities of managers. The conclusion encapsulates these central insights and speculates on future developments. This study contributes significantly to the evolution of the profession and provides guidance for further research and practical applications.

Key Results

The study explored AI's use in communication management through interview analysis, revealing diverse applications like text, design, translation, voice, and network AIs. Text AIs, especially *ChatGPT*, are the most commonly used, mainly for creating communication products and operational tasks. Positive attitudes towards AI generally prevail, though uncertainties and mixed opinions exist. Internal discussions often revolve around AI usage, concerns, and training needs, although some companies rarely discuss AI, perceiving minimal impact. Emerging roles include quality controllers for AI content, with essential competencies identified as empathy, targeted communication, content expertise, and particularly analytical skills. Traits like innovativeness and curiosity are vital for AI management. Challenges include data protection and information verification, while AI also presents opportunities for efficiency and innovation. The study underscores AI's significant impact on communication manager roles and the competencies needed to manage these changes effectively.

Central Answer to the Leading Research Question

The research question, which addresses the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) development on the competency profile of communication managers, is crucial for analyzing the current dynamics in the communication industry. Recent studies have shown that AI integration in companies is not merely a marginal phenomenon but rather indicates a fundamental shift in how communication managers work and what is required of them. The impact of AI on their competency profile is extensive, going well beyond simple process automation. One key role that has emerged is the quality controller, responsible for ensuring the quality and integrity of AI-generated content. Moreover, analytical skills have become increasingly important to

understand, interpret, and, if necessary, correct the outputs of AI algorithms. As a result, the competency profile required of communication managers has expanded to include not only traditional communication skills but also technical capabilities. Additionally, qualities such as innovation, self-initiation, and a commitment to continual professional development are essential in an AI-driven work environment. Despite the opportunities AI integration offers, communication managers also face challenges, particularly concerning data protection, information verification, and ethical considerations. Therefore, a comprehensive competency profile that combines traditional communicative abilities with technical knowledge, analytical skills, and readiness for innovation is essential. Overall, the study indicates that AI development influences the competency profile of communication managers, underlining the critical importance of adapting to these changes by continually enhancing and developing their skills and competencies.

Outlook

The future research outlook for AI in communication management is promising. Focus areas should include examining how AI integration influences the skills and competency profiles of communication managers and its effect on operations, structures, and dynamics within communication teams. Studies should explore how managers use AI to refine strategies and meet audience needs, alongside case studies on AI's effectiveness. Research should also consider the ethical and legal implications of AI and the need for adapted training programs to equip managers for AI's challenges and opportunities. These efforts are crucial for understanding and responsibly implementing AI in communication management.

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Self-staging or brand authenticity?

A qualitative content analysis of German-language LinkedIn posts by high-reach corporate influencers

Kelly Busch, Kirsten Göthel, Dominik Kewe, Carl Krauß, Laura Zapke

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Abstract

This research project examines how high-reach corporate influencers (CI) stage them-selves and their corporate brand in German-language LinkedIn posts. Based on the theory of Impression Management, the aim of three research questions is to work out which topics CI address with their LinkedIn posts, which aspects of brand authenticity and self-staging are reflected in their LinkedIn posts, and how these aspects are reflected in their interaction with the community. 100 posts from a total of 10 different members of LinkedIn's Top Voices program were analyzed using Kuckartz's content-structured qualitative content analysis. A total of six different dimensions were identified for each of self-staging and brand authenticity. For self-staging, these are education and willingness to learn, personal experiences, highlighting ac-tivities outside the company, own perspective and own abilities as well as private details. For brand authenticity, these are brand positioning, recruiting, promotion, knowledge sharing, cor-porate culture and appreciation. With the exception of recruiting, the same aspects are found in the interaction with the community, supplemented on both sides by the aspect of defense. *Keywords: Impression Management, corporate influencer, self-staging, brand authenticity*

Introduction

Social media influencers (SMI) are prominent faces that have become an integral part of the online world. They provide insights into their personality, their thoughts and into their world. This is also becoming increasingly important for brands and companies. Recently, it has been observed that they are more frequently building up their own internal brand ambassadors as authentic corporate voices, who can be referred to as corporate influencers (CI). CI repre-sent the organization on their own digital channels and provide insights into its corporate cul-ture and values (Hesse & Schmidt, 2022). There is a great deal of interest in the practical field concerning the use, application and design of CI within organizations. In particular, guidelines for the usage of CI within a corporation are given special attention, although they lack a theo-retical basis. Nevertheless, this practical interest shows the relevance of CI as an established instrument of corporate communication (DIM, 2023; OMR, 2022). Although influencer market-ing is an empirically advanced field, the particular research field of CI still remains open (Hesse

& Schmidt, 2022). Tangible and overarching elements or key aspects of CI contributions are missing, while practical guides already offer these on a non-empirical basis.

To address this research gap, this paper focuses particularly on the key concepts of "brand authenticity" and "self-staging" as important dimensions for influencers in the corporate context. While brand authenticity is considered the most important lever for building brand trust (Burmann et al., 2023), Hesse et al. (2021) point out that private insights from CI can also serve as an authenticity factor. Since CI primarily use the professional network LinkedIn (Atzl & Graßl, 2022) for their online presence, this study focuses on this platform. Although the phenomenon is already characterized by practical relevance, it has hardly been investigated empirically. Studies on the phenomenon of CI have so far dealt with various case studies of CI at Deutsche Telekom or OTTO (Hesse et al., 2021; Marten & Kirchmeer, 2018), parasocial relationships with CI (Egbert & Rudeloff, 2023) or analyzed success factors of CEOs as CI on LinkedIn (Atzl & Graßl, 2022).

This work pertains to the field of corporate communication. Corporate communication can be described as all "communications by, in and about companies" (Zerfass & Link, 2022, p. 239). Depending on the instance from which the communication emerges, companies can interact as communication actors or objects (Zerfass & Link, 2022). Consequently, CI can be assigned to the field of corporate communication, as they can make pivotal contributions to the representation of not only themselves, but their company and its corporate culture. It can be assumed that CI play a special role, as they speak publicly about the company without being an official corporate speaker. In the context of this study, the CI phenomenon is understood as the representation of the company on the individual's own digital channels. As personal voices, CI provide authentic insights and post transparently on behalf of the company to support the achievement of corporate goals (Hesse & Schmidt, 2022). Thus, CI act as ambassadors for the corporate brand and represent the brand's mission, ambitions, rules and values (Hesse & Schmidt, 2022). On the other hand, this study is based on the theory of impression management (IM), which focuses on strategies for presenting oneself. The aim of IM is to consciously manage one's own impression using various techniques to achieve individual and collective goals (Piwinger & Bazil, 2019). The theory of IM thus provides an approach to the self-staging strategies CI use on their LinkedIn channels.

To narrow the existing research gap, a content-structured qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018) is conducted examining LinkedIn posts of high-reach CI and their corresponding comments. The population of this analysis is the entirety of all posts by German-speaking, high-reach CI on LinkedIn, as well as their interactions with comments posted in response to them. Ten CI who are part of the LinkedIn's Top Voices program were selected, with ten posts per CI analyzed in detail. Units of analysis consist of individual or combined units of meaning derived from the 100 LinkedIn posts and their corresponding comments.

Succinct sub-research questions will be formulated to structure the study. The overarching and research leading question is formulated as follows:

RLQ*: How do high-reach corporate influencers stage themselves and their corporate brand in their German-language LinkedIn posts?*

Theory

Impression Management

The idea of "actors on the stage of the world" (Tedeschi, 1981, p. XV) presenting themselves is already reflected in Shakespeare's plays. In the field of social sciences, the idea was, among others, taken up by George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman. Goffman (1959) compared human action with the staging of theater and refers to the self-presentation practiced as IM for the first time. Based on Goffman's publications, the psychologists Barry R. Schlenker and James T. Tedeschi established their own research tradition. Schlenker (1980) defines IM as "the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions. When these images are self-relevant, the behavior is termed self-representation" (p. 6). IM is therefore a staging and self-presentation strategy through which the impression is to be managed and controlled. The aim is to change one's own impression from the self-image, the actual state, to the self-concept, the target state, through staging. This serves to maximize self-esteem, improve status, differentiate one's own impression and secure power and influence as the basis for achieving individual and collective goals. The credible presentation of the organization or person is of central importance. (Piwinger & Bazil, 2019)

The Taxonomy of Impression Management

Research in the field of IM focuses on exploring the techniques, strategies and tactics used for the purpose of self-presentation and the classification of these. Schlenker (1980) presents various forms of self-presentation, including "ingratiation", as the first form of IM to be studied (p. 169). In 1982, Jones and Pittman added four self-presentation strategies: "intimidation", "self-promotion", "exemplification" and "supplication" (p. 235). In practice, the five strategies are not always clearly distinguishable and can also be used in combination. The taxonomy of Jones and Pittman (1982) has since then been supplemented by various contributions. A possible classification of the currently differentiated IM techniques is shown in Table 1 (Piwinger & Bazil, 2019).

Table 1

Taxonomy of impression management (Piwinger & Bazil, 2019, p. 568 based on Bazil, 2005, p. 32)

	Strategies	Tactics
Positive IM technique (assertive)	Attraction	Ingratiation
	Prestige/Status	Self-promotion
	Credibility	Exemplification
	Trustworthiness	Intimidation
	Self-disclosure	Supplication
		Entitlement
		Enhancement
		Basking
		Boosting
Negative IM technique (defensive)	Dependence	Apology
	Weakness	Justification
	Self-handicapping	Disclaimer
		Defense of innocence
		Blasting
		Understatement

The distinction between IM strategies and tactics shown in Table 1 goes back to Tedeschi (1981) and relates to the time frame and situational dependency of the respective objectives. While IM strategies are used for long-term, situation-independent goals, IM tactics are used to achieve short-term, situation-dependent goals. However, this more recent conceptual differentiation is not used consistently in all publications on IM. Mummendey (1995) in turn differentiates between negative, defensive techniques for use in crisis situations or in the event of failure, and positive, assertive techniques for expressing competence, credibility and openness. This results in the four fields shown in Table 1, into which the currently known types of self-presentation can be categorized. In practice, however, such a strict demarcation and classification of the methods used proves difficult.

Self-Presentation in the Context of Social Media

The web 2.0 offers new framework conditions for IM. In contrast to real interactions, it is not necessary to first create a suitable situation for self-presentation, as the necessary stage and audience are available at all times. In addition, impressions, stories and deeds that match the self-concept can be specifically selected and presented and contrary aspects deliberately

not depicted. The online world also offers the possibility of creating several versions of the self according to the group of recipients. On the other hand, the Internet presence also increases the risk of misinformation and the skepticism of the audience. For these reasons, this paper will apply the theory of IM to self-presentation on a social media platform. Overall, the majority of previous research has focused on self-presentation in the real world. However, these basic principles can be transferred to the object of this research project as it is done by Nessmann (2005), who applies assertive staging techniques to the area of person-oriented public relations. Nessmann (2005) also distinguishes the staging strategies of individuals on the basis of five characteristics, which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Staging strategies of persons (Nessmann, 2005, p. 44)

Loud or quiet:	loud or quiet, emotional or factual - depending on the type
Formal or informal:	either via official, institutional information and communication channels or rather via private, informal detours
Media-centered or dialogue-oriented:	either the direct route via mass media or the direct route to the target group (e.g., in the form of personal conversations, dialogue events)
Provocative or consensus-oriented:	either by polarizing or deliberately breaking rules and regulations (to attract attention) or by adapting to social norms and focusing on consensus and a willingness to compromise
Person-centered or issue-oriented:	either placing the person themselves with all their strengths and weaknesses at the center of the strategy or focusing more strongly on the content and messages of the person or the company

These differentiating characteristics can be applied to the subject of this study as follows: The research project will examine the self-presentation of CI on LinkedIn. Based on the characteristics shown in Table 2, LinkedIn can be classified as a media-centered, but rather private and informal communication channel. Even though it is not an official communication channel of the company, the posts on LinkedIn are aimed at a broader target group. In addition, as shown in Table 2, the staging strategies of individuals are also divided into person-centered and topic-oriented. Similarly, the aspects of brand authenticity and self-staging in the LinkedIn posts of high-reach CI are to be examined as part of the research project.

Corporate Communication: Social Media and LinkedIn

The main purpose of social media is social networking, where users interact with others who have similar interests or commonalities (Carr & Hayes, 2015). The concept of user-

generated content (UGC) allows users to become producers and consumers simultaneously. The exchange of information among consumers frequently entails a communicative exchange about products, services or brands. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a plethora of different networking platforms with varying applications and functions (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

LinkedIn is a social media platform designed for professionals to build business networks. With over one billion users, LinkedIn is the largest professional network in the world (Davis et. al, 2020). One of the main features of LinkedIn is the ability to create personal profiles with professional background, skills, and experience. Thus it is commonly used for self-presentation and recruitment purposes (van Dijck, 2013). Overall, LinkedIn plays a vital role by providing a platform for professionals to connect globally. Self-staging involves the strategic use of behavior, appearance, and communication to achieve a desired effect on an audience, which is consistent with the theory of IM (Piwinger & Bazil, 2019). The audience, i.e., the community, plays a central role in this process, as text, images, and sound are often used simultaneously to digitally present oneself. In the context of CI on platforms such as LinkedIn, self-presentation involves how they portray their professional identity to cultivate a favorable and influential perception while showcasing their expertise (van Dijck, 2013).

Corporate Influencers on LinkedIn

In marketing research, terms like brand ambassador or brand advocate refer to employees who promote the brand to internal and external stakeholders to build brand equity and increase sales (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018). Well-known public figures who have a certain network, reach or special expertise, such as testimonials or SMI are also used by companies to communicate brand messages (Enke & Borchers, 2021). In recent years, influencer marketing has gained attention in the scientific community. It is important to differentiate CI from SMI, as SMI are not employees of a company. Enke and Borchers (2021) define SMI from a strategic communication perspective as individuals who have a large following and reach on social media, interact with key players and have influence on relevant stakeholders of the company through the creation and distribution of content. Conversely, CI are defined as internal actors of the company who also have influence and actively promote the brand (Enke & Borchers, 2021).

Corporate Influencers in the Corporate Context

CI voluntarily share content on their personal social media channels to positively influence brand perception and support operational goals. They embody the brand's mission, values, and norms, using social media to increase visibility (Hesse & Schmidt, 2022). CI as communicative and well-connected representatives support the official corporate communication through their personal and digital networks, benefiting from their high credibility as information sources compared to the management board (Ninova-Solovykh & Einwiller, 2021). Functioning

as credible experts and enthusiastic brand representatives, CI exert substantial influence on internal and external stakeholders by engaging in professional discourse, sharing insights into their daily work, and interacting with their communities. However, their actions entail inherent risks, as negative statements could potentially damage the company's reputation (Ninova-Solovykh & Einwiller, 2021). Recognizing the value of employee communication, numerous companies, including Rewe Group, Deutsche Telekom, Starbucks, and Microsoft, implement CI programs to cultivate authentic brand ambassadors and orchestrate communication (Ninova-Solovykh & Einwiller, 2021). Business platforms like LinkedIn or Xing are commonly utilized for CI activities (Hesse & Schmidt, 2022).

The Importance of Corporate Influencers

The use of SMI to enhance corporate values has been extensively studied, focusing on aspects such as perceived authenticity, credibility, and their impact on brand perception and trust (Breves et al., 2021). Some of the findings include a positive attitude towards messages, reduced persuasion knowledge, and enhanced corporate reputation through the use of SMI in advertising (Shrivastava & Jain, 2022). Brand authenticity emerges as a critical factor, influencing brand trust and purchase intention. These findings highlight the importance of SMI in positively shaping brand perception, reputation, and consumer behavior towards a company (Burmann et al., 2023). As defined by Schallehn et al. (2014), brand authenticity pertains to the perceived truthfulness of the proclaimed brand utility, i.e., the brand positioning. Authenticity serves as a crucial lever for building brand trust. Additionally, integrity and originality are key factors in distinguishing the brand from competitors. The alignment between the brand's external image and internal stakeholders' perception ensures authenticity (Schallehn et al., 2014).

Studies indicate that disclosing personal information and fostering parasocial relationships with influencers enhance credibility, trust, and purchase intent (Breves et al., 2021). This relationship also positively impacts customer market value, acquisition, and loyalty, as well as brand image and equity (Egbert & Rudeloff, 2023). Parasocial relationships with both SMI and CI contribute significantly to strategic company value beyond increasing purchase intention (Egbert & Rudeloff, 2023). Hesse et al. (2022) highlight the active role of employees as brand ambassadors, emphasizing their significant impact on employee-based brand equity. In addition, Thelen (2020) shows that employee advocacy has a positive impact on business growth and human capital, including talent acquisition, retention, engagement and productivity, as well as corporate reputation and issues management.

Janssen and Rudeloff (2024) found that the perceived fit between companies and influencers, along with parasocial interaction, positively influence employer reputation, image, and application intentions. CI exert a stronger positive influence on employer brand than SMI, highlighting the potential of employees as communicators. Integrating corporate ambassadors into overall communication strategies offers opportunities such as increased trust and positive

reputational effects, but also risks such as work stress and lack of integration. While communication experts recognize the benefits of corporate ambassadors in extending reach and authenticity, they express concerns about losing control of communications (Brockhaus et al., 2020).

Methodology

Research Questions

Based on the theory of IM and the subsequent analysis of the empirical data collected, the research leading question: How do high-reach corporate influencers stage themselves and their corporate brand in their German-language LinkedIn posts? will be answered. In IM theory, strategic self-presentation is emphasized as a central means of creating a desired image of one's own personality. It can be assumed that CI have an interest in achieving their self-concept through staging and using various IM techniques. CI can use their LinkedIn posts to present themselves and their corporate brand in a certain light and thereby convey self-staging and brand authenticity in various dimensions. Numerous german case studies only examine individual CI, e.g., at OTTO (Marten & Kirchmeer, 2018) or Deutsche Telekom (Hesse et al., 2021). Although this study is of a qualitative nature, the analysis of LinkedIn posts from ten different CI is used to highlight different facets of the two dimensions self-staging and brand authenticity.

According to Zerfass and Link (2022), companies can act as both an actor and an object in the context of corporate communication. CI take on an intermediate role here. To create brand authenticity, it is essential that the brand identity is firmly anchored in the behavior of employees (Burmann et al., 2023). As personal voices CI can act as brand ambassadors (Hesse & Schmidt, 2022), which highlights the importance of self-staging. Since, according to Piwinger and Bazil (2019), reaction patterns are part of the IM's behavioral repertoire and high engagement are the success factors of CI (Hesse et al., 2021), the aspects of brand authenticity and self-staging should also be examined in direct interactions. To identify precisely dimensions for self-staging and brand authenticity each, the following two research questions are formed:

RQ1: *What aspects of self-staging can be found in LinkedIn posts and comments?*

RQ2: *What aspects of brand authenticity can be found in LinkedIn posts and comments?*

Methodical approach

As described at the beginning, there is a lack of empirical research in the field of CI. As a means to gaining insight into areas that have been little explored, a qualitative research

design is appropriate (Mayring, 2022). A content analysis of the LinkedIn posts of CI is reasonable given the interest of the study.

The population of the research project comprises all publicly shared posts on LinkedIn from German-speaking, high-reach CI. Since it is not publicly visible who the CI with the highest reach are, the "LinkedIn Top Voices" were used as a guide (LinkedIn Top Voices | LinkedIn Hilfe, o. D.). A CI had to be identified on LinkedIn as an employee of a company and use a private channel. The minimum reach was set at a follower count of 7,500. The profile should have at least ten posts within the last year and while working at the company. Shared posts, posts without at least one comment interaction, and posts under 50 characters were excluded. The profiles valid for the study were then reduced to ten profiles that are as different as possible by means of a targeted pre-selection according to the criteria of category, role in the company, gender and age (Table 3). The ten most recent posts from these profiles were selected, resulting in a total of 100 posts. The posts were archived on December 10 and 11, 2023, with one CI to be replaced on December 18, 2023, and one on January 11, 2023, for which it was later determined that they did not meet the sampling criteria.

Table 3

CI of the study sample

Name	Code	Follower Count
Kenza Ait Si Abbou	A	19.564
Antonia Götsch	B	29.889
Lunia Hara	C	36.881
Christine Mengelée	D	11.669
Dr. Aylin Karabulut	E	17.733
Anahita Thoms	F	54.218
Lazar Backovic	G	9.225
Florian Staßfurth	H	7.691
Janna Linke	I	32.082
Selina Schroeter	J	7.746

The LinkedIn posts were analyzed in a deductive-inductive mixed form based on the content-structured qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018). A post can contain several meaning units. Six main categories were deductively formed based on the research questions and the theoretical background (Table 4). Identical subcategories were formed for the first two main categories and the next two. The only exception is the subcategory *defense*, which only appears in the comments. Within four of the six main categories, there are therefore a total of 14 different subcategories. Because the quality criteria of quantitative research cannot be transferred to qualitative research in this form (Mayring, 2022), a detailed, transparent and comprehensible description of the research process is necessary to ensure the intersubjective comprehensibility of the analysis (Kuckartz, 2018). The research process of this study was described in a detailed and transparent manner using the internal study quality checklist by Kuckartz (2018, pp. 204–205). To make the coding process and the category system as intersubjectively understandable as possible, the coding was developed in discussion with several people.

Table 4

Main categories

Main category	Definition (short version)
K1_Self-staging *K2_Comment self-staging*	The category is coded for all meaning units in posts (K1) and comments (K2) that contain aspects of self-staging.
K3_Brand authenticity *K4_Comment brand authenticity*	The category is coded for all meaning units in posts (K3) and comments (K4) that contain aspects of brand authenticity.
K5_Mixed form	The category is coded if both an aspect of self-staging and brand authenticity are found in a unit of meaning.
K6_neutral	The category is coded if the entire post does not contain aspects of self-staging or brand authenticity.

Results

Self-staging in LinkedIn posts

To answer RQ1: *What aspects of self-staging can be found in LinkedIn posts and comments?* regarding LinkedIn posts the category *K1_Self-staging* is analyzed. This includes not only the positioning of one's own person, private insights and personal presentation, but also individual preferences, attitudes and the description of one's own behavior. A total of six different dimensions of self-staging were identified in the 144 coded units of the CI's LinkedIn posts, which were 100 posts in total. One post can include several meaning units. The identified self-staging dimension are:

- *Education and willingness to learn*
- *Personal experiences*
- *Initiatives outside the organization*
- *Personal perspective*
- *Core competencies*
- *Private details*

CI relate to their own level of knowledge with presenting studies or findings, e.g.,"the DGNB study I am referring to here is about 2 years old, but as far as I know there are few more comprehensive studies" (051_F [translated]), or with their own education. This dimension of self-staging can be explained as *education and willingness to learn*. It can be assumed that the CI stages the own person to appear knowledgeable and cultivated and thus positively influence the respective self-image. This dimension also includes the will to expand this knowledge. In this way, CI signal an interest in expanding their education and convey an awareness of a lack of knowledge. Another dimension can be seen within sharing *personal experiences* by CI. CI present themselves by reporting on learnings, acquired skills, solutions or dealing with different challenges to emphasize their personal experiences:

> For me, remote work is currently reaching its limits. / […] / My solution lies in personal contacts. Team spirit and direct encounters can achieve so much. That's why I'm particularly pleased to be on my way to Berlin to join the team. (096_J [translated])

Nevertheless, personal experiences do not necessarily have to be linked to new learnings or solutions from the CI, those can also be everyday issues. This dimension can be interpreted as credibility and authenticity of the CI.

A more subjective dimension is the presentation of *personal perspectives,* which can be described as a particularly common aspect of self-staging, although this cannot be considered representative due to the qualitative research framework. CI stage themselves by sharing their own opinions and thus clearly their own position: "24/7/365 does not help our economy" (032_D [translated]). Within this analysis, indicators such as the subjective presentation and

the thematisation of personal sensitivities were particularly noticeable. For example, CI position their own point of view through active formulations in strong declarative sentences such as "I say yes" (021_C [translated]). The focus is also on emotional situations like sick child days, on beliefs and existing thought patterns. The dimension *core competencies* of self-staging focuses on actual skills, such as hard and soft skills, and covers character traits and competencies to specific talents and skills. Here, a comparison can be drawn with the IM technique of self-promotion. CI explicitly attribute certain skills to their own person, e.g. language skills, which not only convey identity, but are also intended to establish a positive impression. Statements such as "With my career, I have broken completely new ground that no one in my family has ever traveled before." (050_E [translated]) show resilience and a pioneering spirit. "Being there when I'm needed" (060_F [translated]) also emphasizes reliability and the ability to work in a team.

Detached from the personality, opinion or skills of the CI, self-staging includes activities in a business context to showcase competences outside the organization they work for. As a dimension of self-staging this can be named as *initiatives outside the organization.* These include panel participation, meetings, networking activities or speaker activities. Common to all previously recognized dimensions of self-staging is their occurrence in a business context. But the dimension of *private details* includes sharing details about the CI's own private life, such as family situations, hobbies or rituals in the personal environment, e.g., "For us, as for so many parents, the last few weeks have been characterized by countless infections and an exciting, actually almost unbelievable range of childhood illnesses." (078_H [translated]). This dimension can also contribute to the authentic and reliable presentation. Here, a connection to the theory of IM is also noticeable.

Based on these qualitative findings regarding the aspect of self-staging in LinkedIn posts by CI, hypotheses can be formed to be proven with further quantitative empirical research. Derived from the frequency distribution of this work, which is not valid due to its qualitative nature, it can be assumed that CI's self-staging in LinkedIn posts is particularly high. In this analysis alone, among 100 coded LinkedIn posts, there are 144 meaning units that are related to self-staging. So the following hypothesis is made up *H1: The aspect of self-staging is found with above-average frequency in LinkedIn posts by CI.* It should also be empirically examined whether the dimension of personal perspectives as a form of self-staging also dominates in quantitatively prepared research frameworks as stated in hypothesis two *H2: The focus of CI in the aspect of self-presentation in LinkedIn posts is on personal perspectives.*

Self-staging in LinkedIn comments

The interaction of the CI with the community takes center stage with the results of *K2_Comment self-staging*. The following findings are based on the coded units in the comments written by the CI. 216 coded units were found in the 100 LinkedIn posts for self-staging

in LinkedIn comments. The dimensions of CI's self-staging in LinkedIn comments are similar to the aspects of self-staging in the LinkedIn posts. In general, the following seven dimensions of self-staging can be categorized in LinkedIn comments:

- *Education and willingness to learn:* CI present themselves as educated, willing to learn and education-orientated, e.g., "Please send us detailed information so we can benefit from your knowledge" (033_D [translated]).

- *Personal experiences:* CI include their own experiences and related experiences in their LinkedIn comments, e.g., "In my experience, this is often missing or not deep enough" (020_B [translated]).

- *Initiatives outside the company:* CI present commitments and interests beyond their professional role, e.g., "[Name] was also recently a guest on my podcast HOW TO HACK from Business Punk [...]" (090_I [translated]).

- *Personal perspective:* CI communicate their viewpoints, attitudes and opinions. In the context of this analysis, a clear representation of this type of self-presentation is missing in the comments of CI, e.g., "Of course, I personally don't like abstention at all" (037_D [translated]).

- *Core competencies:* CI emphasize their personal, technical, conceptual or social competencies and skills, e.g., "I only see more opportunities than others and this view is my ingredient for a happy life" (008_A [translated]).

- *Private details:* CI provide insight into their private lives outside the business context, e.g., "[...] (and of course the kids are waiting for any supposed embarrassment, so I'm curious to see what else puberty will bring to our home)" (011_B [translated]).

- *Defense:* CI defend themselves, their opinion and their perspectives, e.g., "You have to look to the left and right to see that in our working world. And especially when it's like you describe, you should talk about it and support each other in the fathers' community. That has nothing to do with attention" (080_H [translated]).

It was found that CI not only present their own position and opinion in comments on LinkedIn in particular, but also actively defend it: "Right [Name], not everyone can recognise everything [...], but there is a lot that can be deduced with common sense" (034_D [translated]). In doing so, the CI presents the own point of view in a special way. This loyalty and transparency can be interpreted as reinforcing a positive impression. In addition, parallels to defensive techniques of the IM can be recognized here.

Again with a view to the frequency distribution, a further hypothesis regarding the aspect of self-staging can be derived as H3: *CI use more self-staging strategies in LinkedIn comments than in LinkedIn posts*. This hypothesis results from the fact that within this study, significantly more units of meaning, more precisely 216 coded units, can be identified in the comments written by the CI themselves than in the LinkedIn posts, more precisely 144 coded units.

This indicates a more intense self-staging in the direct interaction with the community.

To finally answer RQ1, the different dimensions of self-staging identified in this study can be traced back to the theory of IM and thus emphasize the conscious presentation of oneself to shape the self-image towards the target state. On the one hand, self-staging can serve to gain authenticity by clearly sharing one's *personal perspective*, but also *private details* and *personal experiences*. On the other hand, dimensions such as *core competencies*, *initiatives outside the company*, and *education and willingness to learn* make it possible to make one's self-image more attractive. Thus, credibility, authenticity, and competence as well as attractiveness and positive attribution of the CI can be achieved through the different dimensions of self-staging. The analysis of CI comments on LinkedIn shows a significantly more intense self-staging compared to the actual posts. This emphasizes the importance of interaction with the community.

Brand authenticity in LinkedIn posts

To answer RQ2: *What aspects of brand authenticity can be found in the LinkedIn posts and comments?* regarding LinkedIn posts the category *K3_Brand authenticity* is analyzed. Following the definition of brand authenticity in the Theory section, brand authenticity includes representation, description of brand behavior, descriptions of day-to-day company life and current developments as well as insights into the corporate culture. A total of six different aspects of brand authenticity were identified within 74 coded meaning units, which can be found in the 100 analyzed LinkedIn posts by CI. While the first three aspects are more related to formal aspects, the last two are more informal:

- *Brand positioning*
- *Recruiting*
- *Promotion*
- *Knowledge sharing*
- *Corporate culture*
- *Appreciation*

One form of brand authenticity lies in the *brand positioning*. This involves communicating the company's goals and reasons for action. With statements such as "At diconium, sustainability is not only important to us ... but we also consider this in our customer projects" (029_C [translated]). CI show how the company positions itself and justify its actions. CI also use LinkedIn for *recruiting* by sharing job adverts and actively promoting their company as an employer. In some cases, the posts are not only aimed at potential applicants but explicitly ask the network to forward the information to suitable applicants: "If you know suitable people in your network: Feel free to share and spread the word!" (046_E [translated]). One contribution explicitly combines the positive presentation of the *corporate culture* with a subsequent call to

take a look at the company's career page: "If you are looking for a new or first professional challenge, you should definitely take a look at the REWE homepage - it's worth it!" (031_D [translated]). One of the most frequently identified elements in the analyzed posts is *promotion*. CI describe and promote products and services by referring to articles, newsletters, programs, and podcasts by them and their colleagues. They advertise new company communication channels, new sales channels, courses and events, and concepts. Alongside *promotion*, *knowledge sharing* is by far one of the most frequently identified categories. CI share knowledge that they obtain from various sources: Own specialized knowledge, personal experience, knowledge from studies and external expert knowledge. In some cases, different sources are also combined, e.g., personal experience with external expert knowledge, presumably to increase credibility. The range of topics is broad. Among other things, trends in the corporate world such as digital transformation or social media platforms are covered, as are industry topics or relevant economic and political events. Occupational psychology topics such as feedback processes as well as leadership topics and questions relating to careers and career entry are also popular. The targeted audiences of this knowledge transfer vary and range from companies facing similar challenges, management and executives, employers and employees to the general community.

In addition to the more formal side of the organization described in the first three categories, CI also address informal aspects. This includes aspects of the *corporate culture* such as the discussion of values, orientations, rituals, and working methods. CI talk about corporate values such as diversity, community, and togetherness: "That's what characterizes #REWE Group - togetherness. And last night at the Christmas party, I experienced it again live … This togetherness, especially in everyday working life, is - in my view - what contributes significantly to the success of REWE Group" (031_D [translated]). *Appreciation* towards colleagues, employees, customers or clients, and the company itself is another aspect of brand authenticity that is more on the informal side. Statements such as "Thank you to all FIEGE colleagues who helped out today" (004_A [translated]), illustrate the CI's endeavor to express gratitude authentically.

The great effort that CI apparently make to produce a large number of positive posts about their company suggests that they derive a benefit from this presentation. It can be assumed that the companies also expect to benefit if they tolerate or perhaps even actively support employees talking publicly about the company to such an extent. It can be assumed that the presentation of aspects of brand authenticity, e.g., brand positioning, leads to a higher perceived brand authenticity. Based on this considerations, the following hypothesis H4 is made: *The representation of brand positioning in LinkedIn posts of CI correlates positively with perceived brand authenticity.*

Brand authenticity in LinkedIn comments

This chapter aims to answer RQ2 for LinkedIn comments. The findings are based on the analysis of the category K4_Comment brand authenticity. For this category 54 meaning units were found. The various identified aspects of brand authenticity are also reflected in the interaction with the community; only recruiting does not take place here. The biggest difference to the contributions is that the elements that express brand authenticity are for the most part explained in less detail in the comments. Otherwise, brand authenticity is presented in a similar way to LinkedIn posts. CI also do brand positioning in the comments: "For us, it's always about scientific studies and findings based on research at the best universities in the world" (017_B [translated]). The corporate culture is addressed, for example, by talking about a flexible working environment. Promotion can also be found, often referring to more information from the company or CI on the topic of the post. Knowledge sharing takes place in a much more compact form, e.g., "[Name] said that it helps her to remember that critical feedback can benefit not only her, but possibly everyone in the team to improve a situation or cooperation" (020_B [translated]). A difference that goes beyond the abbreviated description is only evident in the appreciation. While the appreciation in the posts is expressed more generally, in the comments it is mostly expressed personally to individuals, such as "you give me so much positive energy!" (060_F [translated]).

In addition to these aspects, the subcategory defense was identified as an aspect that appears specifically in the comments – as was already the case when analyzing the comments on self-staging. The form of defense can be roughly divided into three categories, informative, cooperative, and confrontational:

1. In the *informative defense*, misunderstandings and misinterpretations from the CI's point of view are corrected by adding further information in a factual form, e.g., "The weak brands mainly related to small electric cars" (062_G [translated]).
2. The *cooperative defense* engages with the arguments of the community while at the same time defending its position, e.g., "Thank you very much for your absolutely justified objection ... I was actually involved in the final decision once again, but beyond that I kept out of it" (095_J [translated]).
3. The *confrontational defense* aims neither to provide factual information nor to make concessions to the community, but to confront directly: "The situation described ... is a customer dialogue. Internally, there are no such statements" (075_H). It is striking that the confrontational defense is chosen above all when the company's beliefs, such as innovations or values, are at stake.

In analyzing how CI defend their company, it was observed that CI are particularly confrontational when the company's beliefs are affected. This suggests that CI defend their company intensively when it is particularly relevant to the perception of the brand. This expressed

in hypothesis H5: *CI show a higher tendency to defend their brand in LinkedIn comments when the comments are particularly relevant to brand perception.* In addition, the observation described above suggests that CI identify particularly strongly with their company's beliefs. Whether this is the case should be tested with a final hypothesis H6: *CI identify more strongly with the goals, beliefs, and values of their company than employees who do not publicly represent their company.*

In summary, it can be said that brand authenticity takes place in many different dimensions, which are overall comprehensive and range from the communication of strategic goals to the active demonstration of corporate culture and recruiting. From the company's perspective, CI generally serve to strengthen the corporate brand, specifically as an employer, but also as an additional multiplier for the dissemination of job advertisements and the promotion of products and services. The second research question can therefore be answered to the effect that brand authenticity can be seen in the LinkedIn posts of the CI in the aspects of *brand positioning*, *recruiting*, *promotion*, *knowledge sharing*, *corporate culture*, and *appreciation*. It can be said that the aspects of brand authenticity in the comments largely correspond to the aspects of brand authenticity in the posts, only presented in less detail. Exceptions are the *recruiting* aspect, which is only in the posts, and the *defense* aspect, which is only in the comments.

Mixed forms

There are aspects of self-staging and brand authenticity in all CI posts analyzed. This suggests that both brand authenticity and self-presentation play an important role for CI. Looking at the frequency distribution, self-staging clearly outweighs brand authenticity. However, this should not be considered representative. The analysis of the category K6_Mixed form revealed that the meaning units in posts and comments largely contain either elements of brand authenticity or self-staging. There was hardly any overlap. Among the 497 units of meaning coded, there are eleven overlaps. This indicates that these areas are treated independently of each other. The following quote is an example of the overlap between self-staging in the form of core competencies and promotion as a form of brand authenticity:

> …I have been able to work intensively with my team on … an exclusive final event of the city's "Starke Veedel, Starkes Köln" programme - an integrated action concept that upgrades eleven social spaces in Cologne and increases the quality of life of the residents. ... We succeeded in conveying the messages and content in both print and digital formats across all channels and in a way that was appropriate for the target group. … We created interest, understanding and engagement on site, which we supplemented with digitally accessible background information. (099_J [translated])

Limitations

It is necessary to also consider the methodological restrictions and limitations of this paper. One challenge is that it is difficult to access the field itself. The determination of suitable research poses a problem due to the lack of objective data on CI. This research intends to address a research gap. The lack of empirical foundations could affect the validity of the results. The use of qualitative methods may also lead to increased subjectivity, particularly when analyzing self-staging, which is why the first coding round was carried out by two coders and group discussions to be able to cover as many perspectives as possible for uniform coding.

In the analysis of the selected posts, only the content was considered and not the CI as individuals. This could result in an incomplete capture of the phenomenon, as the personality and individual characteristics could have a significant impact on their self-staging and perception of brand authenticity. The same applies for visual content, such as images and videos, which were not part of the study. Furthermore, there are only curated lists to identify high-reach CI. While the use of LinkedIn Top-Voices lists is useful, the selection criteria used by LinkedIn are not transparent or intersubjectively comprehensible. For this reason, this paper placed particular emphasis on its own intersubjective comprehensibility. Yet, the study was able to produce results on the basis of which hypotheses could be formulated. The study yielded valuable insights that could not have been achieved through a quantitative approach alone. The credibility and relevance of the research can be strengthened by the transparent presentation of the methodological decisions and a critical reflection of these limitations.

Conclusion

The present study has identified aspects of self-staging and brand authenticity in LinkedIn posts by German-speaking CI. First, the underlying theory of IM was described as the theoretical foundation of this work. Furthermore, these explanations were dedicated to the current state of research regarding the increasingly important phenomenon of CI and LinkedIn in the context of corporate communication (Atzl & Graßl, 2022; Egbert & Rudeloff, 2023; Hesse & Schmidt, 2022; Marten & Kirchmeer, 2018) as well as its significance in practice (DIM, 2023; OMR, 2022). A structured qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) was used to identify brand authenticity and self-staging dimensions in 100 posts from 10 different CI from the LinkedIn Top Voices programs.

The analysis of the 100 LinkedIn posts revealed that both brand authenticity and self-staging are present in all of them. This finding supports the centrality of these phenomena in CI communication strategies and validates the assumption that both aspects are important. Although both self-staging and brand authenticity are employed in each of the analyzed posts, they are rarely linked. In general, both aspects were identified with greater frequency in

LinkedIn comments by CI than in the actual posts. This underscores the significance of inter-action with the community and, consequently, the value of dialog over one-sided communica-tion. According to Piwinger and Bazil (2019), reaction patterns are part of the IM's behavioral repertoire, and high engagement and high reach are the success factors of CI (Hesse et al., 2021). Therefore, the relevance of responses to comments, i.e., the interaction of the CI with its audience, also becomes clear.

The findings of the RLQ: *How do high-reach corporate influencers stage themselves and their corporate brand in their German-language LinkedIn posts?* indicate that high-reach corporate influencers utilize both self-staging and brand authenticity in their LinkedIn posts and comments. These dimensions may vary in their specific characteristics. Six distinct categories were identified for the self-staging dimension, including *education and willingness to learn*, *personal experiences*, *initiatives outside the company*, and *private details*. These aspects can be interpreted as contributing to the establishment of credibility and trust. The ability to share personal experiences can lend authenticity to statements, as it demonstrates that the individual in question possesses both education and a willingness to learn. This, in turn, conveys com-petence. Furthermore, the general positioning of one's own perspective and abilities brings the personality and thus the individual of the CI to the fore. This also demonstrates the applicability of IM theory in the context of self-staging on LinkedIn. The positioning of the personal perspec-tive and the highlighting of core competencies can present CI as experts or thought leaders in their field. These insights demonstrate the importance of an authentic and strategic presenta-tion of CI on LinkedIn.

In the area of brand authenticity, six additional dimensions were identified, namely *brand positioning*, *recruiting*, *promotion*, *knowledge sharing*, *corporate culture* and *apprecia-tion*. These aspects can be interpreted as contributing to a brand's gain in authenticity by im-proving the perception of the corporate brand through the presentation of the CI. This can contribute to the attractiveness of the company as an employer and make the corporate culture visible to the outside world. Ultimately, all of these aspects can contribute to the achievement of strategic corporate goals. This can be achieved through the presentation of an open and appreciative corporate culture, the attraction of suitable employees, or the strengthening of brand loyalty. The analysis indicates that the identified aspects of self-staging and brand au-thenticity are also present in the interaction with the community. One exception is the aspect of *defense*, which occurs more strongly in the interaction with the community and can therefore serve to emphasize the importance of reacting to contrary opinions and points of view. The identification of specific dimensions of self-staging and brand authenticity allows a better un-derstanding of the presentation of CI and their brands on LinkedIn. However, it is crucial to note that any findings and trends presented should be considered within the context of this

analysis. The qualitative research methodology does not allow for any further conclusions to be drawn outside the defined scope of this work.

This analysis thus presents an opportunity for further research, for instance, by testing the built hypotheses. A systematic quantitative analysis could also provide well-founded insights into the distribution of the dimensions of brand authenticity and self-staging, or alternatively, examine the influence of those aspects on likes, engagement, and other key figures. The use of quantitative data could facilitate an objective comparison between the various dimensions of self-presentation and brand authenticity. On a more qualitative level, the relationship between CI and thought leadership could be investigated to map the role of CI as opinion leaders and experts in their respective industries or subject areas. Additionally, interviews with CI can be conducted to identify their self-perception and motivation. For the field of corporate communications, the insights gained offer valuable insights into the design of CI online presence on LinkedIn. These insights can thus serve as an example for companies that also focus on CI as corporate voices.

In conclusion, the present findings demonstrate the pivotal role of brand authenticity and self-staging in multiple dimensions for the communication of CI on LinkedIn. Furthermore, they suggest that an in-depth examination of these concepts is essential for a successful positioning of CI on LinkedIn.

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Right-wing populist communication of the party AfD on TikTok

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- A qualitative content analysis

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Abstract

This study focuses on the right-wing populist communication of the party "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD) on TikTok because of the party's increasing popularity and social media presence. The theoretical foundations are provided by framing theory and the theory of right-wing populism. The study raises the question of the extent to which the AfD uses TikTok in its communication to win over young voters. The research leading question is answered by three research questions that deal with the content, linguistic and audiovisual means and the adaptation of the platform rules. This study draws on the content-structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018). From the AfD's public TikTok videos from the end of 2022 to the end of 2023, 120 videos from six accounts, both party and member of parliament accounts, were identified as the object of investigation using the concentration principle. The analysis is based on 13 main categories and 145 subcategories, which were derived from theory and supplemented inductively. The results show that AfD communication covers topics such as security, anti-establishment attitudes and identity politics. They evoke concerns about general security, such as financial stability, fighting crime, the consequences of war and restrictions on personal freedoms. In doing so, they fuel existential fears and create a climate of insecurity. The party uses populist stylistic devices such as provocation, conspiracy rhetoric, emotionalization, and fear-mongering, simplifying complex issues and undermining rational discourse. It constructs an absolute truth through its own narratives. The AfD hardly adapts any interactive functions and does not follow any TikTok trends. The analysis shows that communication focuses more on content than entertainment. Nevertheless, the AfD relies on a strong visual identity and branding through the integration of colors and logos. Hypotheses can be derived from the results of this research, which serve as a starting point for further research. The findings underline the urgency for democratic parties to adapt their communication

strategy on the TikTok platform in order to ultimately reach not only young voters, but also the growing electorate.

Keywords: right-wing populism, TikTok, framing theory, political communication, social media, AfD

Introduction

The rise of the "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD) party has brought the fight against right-wing extremism and for democracy on the daily agenda of German media and political discussions (dpa, 2024; Rademacher, 2024). In January 2024, investigative research by the media company "Correctiv" (Bornmann, 2024) revealed a meeting of high-ranking AfD politicians, neo-nationalists and entrepreneurs at which the plan to expel people with a migration background from Germany was discussed. This led to an ongoing outrage in society with far-reaching consequences, such as demonstrations (Hölzl & AFP, 2024), statements from companies (Neuerer et al., 2024) and personal consequences for some participants, such as the dismissal of Roland Hartwig, the speaker of AfD chairwoman Alice Weidel (Neuerer, 2024).

At the same time, the AfD's strong presence on social media, in particular the video platform TikTok, is attracting increasing attention (Neumeier et al., 2024; Vorreyer, 2024). The *ZDF Magazin Royale* report showed how AfD politician Maximilian Krah "goes viral" (ZDF Magazin Royale, 2024 [translated]) on the platform with misogyny, racism and anti-democratic thinking. However, in the context of the state elections in Hesse and Bavaria in the fall of 2023, the first specialist magazines and newspapers attributed the 17% and 18% increase in voter numbers among the under-30s to TikTok, among other things. Videos by party members have over one million likes (alice_weidel_afd, 2023; mutzurwahrheit90, 2023). This puts the AfD far ahead of other established parties (Hollender, 2023). It enjoys a pioneering position on the platform and knows how to stage its populist content with messages such as "This is how the traffic lights are destroying our country" (alice_weidel_afd, 2023 [translated]) or "Real men are right-wing" (maximilian_krah, 2023 [translated]). In view of these developments, it becomes evident how relevant this topic is to society and science.

Based on the social and scientific relevance, this thesis deals with the research of right-wing populist communication of the AfD on TikTok. First and foremost, the relevant theories and the state of research need to be clarified, with the framing theory and the theory of populism playing important roles. The base of populist social media communication is framing theory: Populist actors use frames to simplify complex issues and reinforce their messages (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). They tap into public fears and disappointments (Betz, 1994) and thus influence how an audience evaluates certain topics (Goffman, 1974). The theory of populism focuses on the frames of popular centrism and anti-elitism (Mudde, 2004). Right-wing

populism, which can be separated from populism, is additionally defined by the call for xenophobia (Betz, 1994).

According to Wodak (2015), the success of right-wing populist parties depends on effective media strategies that include the comprehensive use of different and new media channels. In the past, communication and political science research has focused heavily on how politicians interact with the public on social media, such as X - formerly Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, resulting in numerous studies (Bossetta, 2018; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Stier et al., 2018). Although the rapid rise of the social media platform TikTok has aroused growing interest in the scientific community (Zeng et al., 2021), there is currently very little research on political communication on TikTok (González-Aguilar et al., 2023). Only one study examined the communication of the right-wing populist party AfD on TikTok, with the result that AfD politicians hide their connections to the political system and present themselves as part of the "pure people" (Bösch, 2023 [translated]) among users, whom they address as friends.

Qualitative content analysis is the most widely used and most relevant method for investigating political communication in social networks (Brosius et al., 2016). A content-structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018) was particularly suitable for answering the research questions. Categories were used to obtain concrete answers to the questions on content-related, rhetorical-stylistic, and technical-visual aspects of communication. The main categories were deductively derived in advance based on theory and the subcategories were formed inductively during the analysis process. The population to be analyzed comprised all public TikTok videos of the AfD party in the period from November 30, 2022 to November 30, 2023. From the population, a sample of six TikTok accounts with the largest number of followers and likes overall was selected using the concentration principle. Finally, the 20 most viewed videos per account were analyzed within the research work, resulting in 120 videos as the object of analysis.

The present status of research and the research gap led to the development of the following research leading question (RLQ): "*To what extent does the AfD use TikTok in its communication to attract young voters?*".

Theory

The following chapter elaborates on the theoretical background of this study and focuses on defining key concepts. The outlined framework serves as a foundation for the subsequent empirical investigation.

Framing Theory - A Definition

Entman (1993) describes Framing as a process that encompasses the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of perceived reality in communication. The goal of this process is

to convey a specific problem definition, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and / or recommendations for action regarding the subject matter. It should be noted that a frame of a message does not necessarily have to encompass all four functions mentioned. Communicators employ frames (schemas) by consciously or unconsciously making decisions about what they want to convey. (Entman, 1993)

According to Entman (1993), these conveyed messages are shaped by frames, which manifest through the presence or absence of specific keywords, common expressions, stereotypical representations, sources of information, and formulations. These frames serve to reinforce thematic compilations of facts or judgments. Entman points out that the frames in a message and the communicator's intention in framing can influence the recipients' thought processes and conclusions but are not necessarily determinative. Framing serves the function of selecting and highlighting specific elements and utilizing them to structure an argument regarding problems, their causes, evaluations, and/or solutions. (Entman, 1993)

Additionally, framing must be conceptualized as a process model in the theory of media effects (Scheufele, 1999). Media frames can be written, spoken, graphic, or visual and are used by a communicator to convey issues and events through the media (D'Angelo, 2017). The accessibility of social media allows individual users to disseminate messages to their followers. Consequently, the application of personal frames as Media Frames on social media is possible, as demonstrated in studies on political campaigns (Sahly et al., 2019). By interconnecting personal and institutional social media profiles through features such as sharing, hyperlinks, hashtags, and retweets, these platforms quickly generate interactive communication streams that influence news production as well as political and organizational communication (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). This structure gives actors more influence in framing as they are able to resonate with the audience's frames regarding current issues or debates (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). Politicians have recognized this potential and deliberately use it, for example, in the context of election campaigns, to reach their target audience. Therefore, the framing theory is also important in the context of populist communication on social media.

Populist actors use frames to simplify complex societal issues and problems and amplify their messages (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Scheufele, 1999). One research emphasizes that strong frames either present compelling and persuasive facts or appeal to emotions such as fear or anger (Chong & Druckman, 2007). These frames are characterized by their property to be considered the most convincing arguments for competing viewpoints on a topic in public discussions. A common political strategy is to associate a proposal with a positive idea or value that finds broad agreement in the population (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In this context, the framing theory identifies rhetorical elements of populist rhetoric in political communication that contribute to its success (Busby et al., 2019). Populist frames focus on emphasizing perceived failures of the government and presenting this as a primary cause of societal burdens. The use

of this rhetoric within the framing approach aims to mobilize populists or the target audience against established political institutions and their representatives (Busby et al., 2019). The success of mobilization depends on the presentation of issues and framing (Wright, 2009).

A challenge in the right-wing framing strategy regarding immigration and national security – a central topic in right-wing populist discourse – is to obscure direct attacks on race and ethnic belonging while simultaneously creating the impression of sharing legitimate concerns about these overarching public issues (Wright, 2009). According to the principles of framing theory, specific problem definition, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and recommendations for action (Entman, 1993), Busby et al. (2019) find that assigning blame is one of the essential mechanisms through which populist rhetoric promotes support for populist actors.

Despite extensive research on framing theory, particularly in the context of news reporting, journalism, and political activism (Busby et al., 2019, De Vreese, 2005; Scheufele, 1999), there exists a research gap in analyzing how right-wing populist actors utilize framing strategies on TikTok to disseminate their political messages. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the specific features of right-wing populist framing on TikTok and thus contributes to expanding research on political communication in digital media.

Right-Wing Populism - A Definition

To provide a basic understanding of right-wing populism on TikTok, an important empirical trend leads to the "ideational approach" (Kaltwasser & Hawkins, 2018). Canovan (1981) explains that although there is no single definition of populism, basic elements can be identified in the dichotomy between "people" and "elite" (Freeden, 2003; Mudde, 2004). Further, Albertazzi and McDonnell (2007) describe populism as an ideology that pits the idea of a virtuous and homogeneous people against a group of elites and dangerous "others". These "others" are portrayed as those who deprive or attempt to deprive the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007).

In this context populism can be understood as "thin" ideology whose core can be linked to other ideological concepts (Decker, 2006; Freeden, 1998, 2003; Lewandowsky & Siri, 2023; Mudde, 2004, 2017; Priester, 2011), which is substantially supported by an overarching ideology in order to articulate itself politically (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In doing so, they offer short-term solutions for political leadership according to the supposed will of the people, without being able to present more precise views and instructions on political institutions or socioeconomic facets (Mudde, 2017). In addition to its ideological characteristics, populism can also include programmatic elements (Müller, 2017), which allows a more precise examination of the concept of right-wing populism (Wolf, 2017).

Accordingly, the political positioning of right-wing populism lies in the role of providing the morally pure and homogeneous people with a voice against the non-moral parasitic elites (Müller, 2017) or political minorities (Wolf, 2017). The stated goals of right-wing populist

programs are identity building (Geden, 2006) to outline a scenario in which lived political, economic, or cultural values must be protected from the influence of elites or minorities on security deficits, ethnopluralism, and economic or social protectionism (Reuter, 2009; Wolf, 2017). Moffitt (2016) describes right-wing populism as using symbolically mediated performative tactics to influence politics, spanning from government to daily life. Decker & Lewandowsky (2017) make a rhetorical distinction between the reduction of complexity, the disposition towards radical solutions, conspiracy theories and thinking in terms of enemy images, provocation, breaking taboos, emotionalization, and fearmongering, as well as the use of violent metaphors.

The identified dichotomy, the program, and the stylistic means of right-wing populism can also be observed in social media. Social media allows the exchange of political content, the initiation of debates, and the formation of collective spaces of understanding (Lewandowsky & Siri, 2023). The study by Enli and Rosenberg (2018) shows that people under 30 tend to trust politicians more and appear more authentic on social media. They show that the practice of communicating an anti-elitist truth on social media can reach a potential (voter) audience more credibly and effectively (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). González-Aguilar et al. (2023) show that TikTok is used both for the communication of ideological principles and for the promotion of respective leaders. TikTok practices focus on attracting voters and supporters and on presenting proposals, criticizing opponents, and praising leaders (González-Aguilar et al., 2023).

As difficult as the term (right-wing) populism is to grasp, its programmatic influences on the formation of political opinion cannot be denied. It is particularly dangerous because no journalistic quality standards are applied in social media (Rußmann, 2019). Regarding that, this research contributes to the understanding of TikTok in the context of right-wing populist political practices of the AfD.

AfD on TikTok - An Overview

The AfD was founded in February 2013 by a group of university professors and former politicians as an eurosceptic party, focusing on economic (ordo-)liberalism, and the promotion of the free market. In the context of the refugee movement in 2015 and their rise of anti-migrant and anti-Muslim attitudes, the party gained momentum (Celik et al., 2020). In 2017, the AfD was able to enter the German Bundestag as the first right-wing party to enter parliament since 1949 (Haller, 2019). The AfD represents "authoritarian, nationalist, homophobic, anti-feminist and historically revisionist positions" (Celik et al., 2020, p. 150).

As early as 2017, in the course of the federal elections, social media campaigns by political parties found their way into traditional media reporting and recorded high access and interaction figures (Haller, 2019). Two thirds of 14- to 29-year-olds use social media daily (Granow & Scolari, 2022). Acquired by Chinese company ByteDance as Musical.ly in 2017, TikTok has become a global phenomenon (Bösch & Köver, 2021), being popular among its

young target group (Granow & Scolari, 2022). With more than two billion downloads (as of 2021), TikTok is the fastest growing platform in the world (Bösch & Köver, 2021). While 1% of users were German in 2019 (Granow & Scolari, 2022), according to TikTok (2023), 20.9 million monthly active users now come from Germany. The daily usage of the platform has grown from 7% to 19% among 14-29 year olds, an increase of 170% (Granow & Scolari, 2022).

TikTok has become a tool of modern political communication for young people (Seng, 2023). Led by the AfD party in first place among German political accounts (Schipmann et al., 2022), almost all parties are representing themselves on TikTok. Although the AfD's official party account was deleted from TikTok in May 2022, more than a third of the AfD's 80 political members as well as supportive parties like "Junge Alternative" already had their own account (Metzger, 2024; Schipmann et al., 2022). In addition, the account of the AfD parliamentary group @afdfraktionimbundestag has 401,000 followers and 6.8 million likes (as of February 2024). This makes the AfD not only the party that uses TikTok the most, but also the most popular compared to other German parties, with the most effective social media communication (Metzger, 2024). On average, AfD videos are viewed three times as often as videos from all other German parties combined (Metzger, 2024). Political and communications consultant J. Hillje credits the AfD's TikTok reach for its success with young voters (Metzger, 2024).

The AfD has been at the center of political, media, and academic discourse for more than a decade (Celik et al., 2020). Wodak (2015) attributes the success of right-wing populist parties to the effective use of media strategies, including the comprehensive use of different and new media channels. Serrano et al.'s (2019) findings show that the AfD's online popularity is superior to other political parties in Germany by focusing on an anti-immigration agenda and avoiding discussion of its economic plans (Serrano et al., 2019). The study by Schelter et al. (2016) concludes that the intensive use of social media is a key success factor for the AfD. Haller's (2019) results show that the AfD party page was able to achieve the highest reach of posts per day in terms of likes, shares, and engagements, concluding that the higher share of posts indicate a stronger online mobilization of supporters.

From the group of populist parties, the AfD achieved the farthest-reaching posts, which were also commented on extensively and homogeneously by users (Degen & Olgemöller, 2023). Degen & Olgemöller (2023) concluded that parties such as the AfD tend to publish emotionalizing and complexity-reducing posts using colloquial language and incomplete and suggestive statements. Bösch (2023) concluded that, unlike other parties, the AfD does not attempt to adapt to the TikTok platform. Instead of entertainment, the AfD pursues its narrative of "truth", "courage", and "freedom" (Bösch, 2023). Furthermore, it disguises its connection to the political system and identifies with the group of "pure people" of TikTok users, who are addressed as friends (Bösch, 2023).

Methodology

In order to investigate how the AfD appeals to younger demographics with its messages on TikTok, qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018) was carried out on the basis of framing theory. The specific content, rhetorical devices and platform adaptations are examined. To effectively analyze text and video content, the content analysis relies on a category system developed through deductive and inductive techniques.

Research questions

The social relevance of this research is evident, as is the dearth of scientific investigation into right-wing populist communication by the AfD on TikTok. Framing theory offers a lens through which to examine communication phenomena, such as the above-mentioned right-wing populist communication of the AfD on TikTok. Actors utilize populist frames to simplify complex social issues and reinforce their messages (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Scheufele, 1999). The following research leading question (RLQ) was derived from the theoretical part of this thesis to review and meaningfully supplement the previous findings on framing, populism and AfD communication on TikTok.

RLQ: *To what extent does the AfD use TikTok as part of its communication to win over young voters?*

To link the theoretical approaches of framing, populism and right-wing populism mentioned above, three further research questions are derived. Using framing theory, it is possible to examine how the AfD presents these themes within the frames on TikTok and what specific content it emphasizes.

RQ1: *What specific content and topics does the AfD choose on TikTok to communicate right-wing populist messages?*

RQ2: *What linguistic means does the AfD use to communicate right-wing populist issues?*

RQ3: *To what extent does the AfD on TikTok adapt current rules of the platform for the spreading of right-wing populist messages?*

Choice of method

Given the paucity of research on right-wing populist parties, particularly the AfD on TikTok (Bösch, 2023), and the outlined research interest, we selected qualitative content analysis for its exploratory qualities. We employed a content-structuring qualitative content analysis as described by Kuckartz (2018), which accommodates both text and video materials effectively (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019). The content framing analysis employs both deductive and inductive techniques to develop a robust category system for investigating specific communicative

frames, directly addressing the research questions (Oswald, 2022). The methodology was further informed by the framework of Rädiker and Kuckartz (2019).

Analysis unit

The research method involved identifying a population of public TikTok videos from AfD party and member accounts that were relevant from November 30, 2022 to November 30, 2023 based on the research questions (Brosius et al., 2016). The concentration principle guided the sample selection, which focused on accounts with significant reach and interaction, as indicated by follower counts and likes (Heidig & Dobbelstein, 2021). The sample included two party accounts and four member of parliament accounts, with follower counts ranging from approximately 45,000 to 320,000 and like counts ranging from 810,000 to 5.6 million (Table 1).

Table 1

Sample

Name	Background	Follower	Likes
@afdfraktionimbundestag	Official account parliamentary group	313.000	5,2 million
@mutzurwahrheit90	Ulrich Siegmund, Chairman of the AfD parliamentary group Saxony-Anhalt	318.800	3,8 million
@sichertdeutschland	Martin Sichert, Health policy spokesman	147.200	2,6 million
@afdsachsen	Official account AfD parliamentary group Saxony	159.600	2.3 million
@alice_weidel_afd	Alice Elisabeth Weidel, Chairwoman AfD Parliamentary Group	243.900	1,4 million
@brandner_afd	Stefan Günther Brandner, Deputy Chairman of the AfD parliamentary group	44.500	796.800

(as of 11/24/23)

A total of 120 videos were analyzed, comprising the 20 most viewed videos from each account. These videos encompassed various phases of the election campaign and seasonal events. All videos were downloaded on December 14, 2023, to ensure consistency in data.

Data analysis

The main categories for analysis were developed deductively from prior research and theory (Baur & Blasius, 2014) and tailored to answer specific research questions. During the initial coding phase, 13 main categories were applied, resulting in 950 coded segments (Table 2). Subsequently, these categories were expanded through an inductive review of the coded segments (Kuckartz, 2018). A second coding run refined these categories further. Throughout the coding process, several reliability tests were conducted to ensure the accuracy of the coding. This rigorous process resulted in a differentiated category system with 2,159 coded segments and 145 sub-categories by the end of the study.

Table 2

Main Codes

Research Question	Main Codes
RQ1	Security
	Anti-establishment attitude
	Identity politics
RQ2	Provocation and breaking taboos
	Style element conspiracy
	Emotionalization and scaremongering
	Complexity reduction & logic errors
	Disposition towards radical solutions
RQ3	Interactive methodical elements
	Audiovisual methodological elements
	Text technology
	Video technology
	Audio technology

Results

The following empirical section examines how the AfD disseminates right-wing populist messages on TikTok. The study addresses three research questions: the specific content and topics the AfD selects, the populist stylistic devices it employs, and the extent to which it adapts to TikTok's platform rules. By examining these areas, the analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the AfD's communication strategies and their impact on the platform's young audience. This section highlights the role of TikTok in the political landscape and the tactics used by the AfD to reach and influence young voters.

RQ1

To answer the first research question "*What specific content and topics does the AfD choose on TikTok to communicate right-wing populist messages?*", three main categories, *Security*, *Identity Politics* and *Anti-Establishment Stance*, were formed deductively.

Security as a "virulent general social issue" (Hall, 1986, p. 101) implies the plight of the "common people" (Hartleb, 2005 [translated]) and a restoration of social order. This distress refers on the one hand to fears of the population regarding crime (Hartleb, 2005), and on the other hand to fears that arise with regard to financial security. The category was inductively broken down into four subcategories in the process: *Danger From Foreign Policy*, *Danger From Migration*, *Inviolability Of The Individual* and *Financial Insecurity*. The subcategory *Danger From Foreign Policy* includes all statements in which politicians accuse the German government of putting Germany at risk of war, e.g. by getting involved in international affairs or provoking an escalation. The subcategory *Danger From Migration* can be illustrated using the example of the AfD Saxony TikTok account: "Now the people see the results [...] of migration.

Everyone sees the increasing loss of our security, our prosperity, our identity, the loss of our homeland." (afdsachsen 09/25/23 [translated]). The subcategory *Inviolability Of The Individual* deals with the interference in personal life or the deprivation of freedom by politics and call for its preservation:

> [...] a politics that has lost all measure and purpose is interfering in our personal lives, presuming to control attitudes and ostracize critics, encroaching on the property of citizens and heirs, engaging in the creeping expropriation and impoverishment of the middle class and threatening the foundations of our economic and social well-being. (alice_weidel_afd 12/31/22 [translated])

The main category *Identity Politics* encompasses issues like immigration, as well as family and gender policy issues (Decker, 2014). It is postulated that conservative social norms should be upheld (Lewandowsky et al., 2016) to protect the national identity and that the German language should be protected for example from gender politics (Rosenfelder, 2017). The norms are expressed in the rejection of equal rights for men and women as well as sexual minorities and discrimination against homosexuals (Lewandowsky et al., 2016). The main category is broken down into the four subcategories *Racist Conviction*, *Speaking Out Against Extremism*, *Nationalism* and *Anti LGBTQ, Gender & Feminism*. Under the subcategory *Racist Conviction* the AfD alleges migrants to be non-integratable and to live contrary to a liberal society. It refers to the "Bürgergeld" (citizen's allowance) as migrant money and calls for an end to monetary benefits for refugees and foreigners. Migrants are also associated with an increased crime burden, which manifests itself in the form of rape, clan crime and murders. Under the subcategory *Speaking Out Against Extremism*, the AfD positions itself against Anti-Semitism, right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, and Islamism while accusing the German government of siding with Islamists and right-wing extremists.

The main category *Anti-Establishment Stance* includes all statements that are based on the belief that the political elites are acting against the interests of the people (Lewandowsky, 2022). The concept of the people is understood as a vague "we" and stands representative for all who are disadvantaged by the group of power holders (Lewandowsky et al., 2016; Lewandowsky, 2022). The main category is broken down into nine sub-categories: *Impoverishment & Loss of Prosperity*, *Wasting Public Funds*, *Manipulation by the Media*, *Disregard for Civic Interests*, *Government Corruption*, *Government Incompetence*, *Government Fraud & Deception*, *Government Alarmism* and *Creating a Sense of Unity*. Under the subcategory *Impoverishment & Loss of Prosperity*, the AfD accuses the government of seizing private property and citizens' pensions and pursuing a widespread impoverishment and expropriation program.

To answer the research question "*What specific content and topics does the AfD choose on TikTok to communicate right-wing populist messages?*", it can be stated that AfD

spread right-wing populist messages on TikTok to establish certain narratives. The AfD addresses various issues on TikTok to construct the narrative of endangered security in Germany. Starting from four major danger poles - migration, the lack of protection of inviolability, foreign policy and financial insecurity - the party uses a wide range of threats to outline a social emergency. Particularly by addressing financial hardships, the party resonates with the young target audience on TikTok. Moreover, it deliberately stokes fears of existence and the future among the young generation by highlighting threats in the form of crime, loss of freedom and identity, or war in Germany.

The AfD presents itself as a combative force for the protection of physical, mental, and financial security. By purportedly exposing the corrupt, incompetent, and non-citizen-focused practices of the federal government, a narrative is created in which the government drives the citizens into crisis. A sense of community is created by calling for resistance against the government. It positions itself as a party close to the people and outlines a positive future with the AfD at the head of the government. The content suggests that the AfD is strategically using TikTok as a platform to shake the trust in established institutions and strengthen its own credibility. By channeling frustration and dissatisfaction, it offers the young target group on TikTok a simple alternative.

The AfD portrays migrants next to the government as the second pillar of the crisis. They are described as a threat and the population, especially the young target group, as worthy of protection. The sense of protection is strengthened by emphasizing the preservation of German nationality. The party positions itself as the guardian of traditional values by speaking out against gender politics, feminism, and LGBTQ rights. The fact that the AfD also speaks out against Anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism suggests that it wants to convey a humane standpoint. This return to traditional values could give the young demographic, which faces constant change, a sense of stability. Considering the outlined analysis, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

H1: *The AfD outlines emergencies on TikTok that present the government and migrants as threats to position itself as a protective force.*

RQ2

The second research question "*What populist stylistic devices does the AfD use on TikTok to communicate its themes?*" focuses on the linguistic and substantive stylistic devices that the AfD uses in its communication on TikTok. To answer RQ2, five main categories were developed to categorize the populist stylistic devices: *Provocation and Taboo Breaking*, *Conspiracy Style Elements*, *Emotionalization and Fear Mongering*, *Complexity Reduction and Logical Fallacies*, and *Disposition to Radical Solutions*. In the process of analysis, the main categories were inductively expanded to 30 subcategories. In total, 744 segments were coded.

The first main category, *Provocation and Taboo Breaking*, includes deliberate taboo breaking and provocation in line with the ideological core of populism (Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). By making drastic statements, AfD politicians attract attention from the public (Bergsdorf, 2000). It is not necessarily about representing popular opinions but rather about distinguishing oneself from the elite and disregarding political correctness (Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). In the inductive differentiation, seven subcategories emerged: *Insult & Defamation*, *Argumentative Stylistic Devices*, *Provocation through Exaggeration*, *Provocation through Irony/Sarcasm*, *Provocation through Questions*, *Provocation through Superiority* and *Relativization*.

The second main category, *Conspiracy Style Elements*, includes linguistic and thematic elements found in conspiracy theories and the construction of scapegoats. Douglas et al. (2019) state that conspiracy theories aim to gain political and economic power, violate rights, and alter institutions. Radical versions create a scapegoat, attributing societal issues to specific groups and portraying the party and its supporters as victims (Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). Through differentiation, five subcategories emerged: *Conspiratorial Vocabulary*, *Construction of Scapegoats*, *Questioning Sovereignty*, *Allusion to Secret Knowledge*, *Doom Scenarios*. For example, a video by afd_sachsen states: "The only thing that is increasing. The number of illegal immigrants, those not deported, are skyrocketing. Here, too, it's stone-cold voter fraud. Most Germans don't want any of this. Current polls show that." (afd_sachsen 06/02/23 [translated]).

The category *Emotionalization and Fear Mongering* reflects Decker and Lewandowsky's (2017) definition, where populist actors use emotional language to express a range of positive and negative emotions, with a significant emphasis on fear to amplify insecurities and anxieties (Ernst et al., 2019; Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). The seven subcategories describe the use of emotional and fear-inducing stylistic devices: *Subjective Assessment*, *Building Scapegoats*, *Exaggeration*, *Sense of Community*, *Moral Adjectives*, *Portrayal of Threat Scenarios*, *Fear Mongering through Generalization*.

The main category *Complexity Reduction & Logical Fallacies* refers to a fundamental element of populist rhetoric, the use of common-sense arguments. In this sense, they serve as a substitute for logical and reliable views, formulating resentments and appeals to common sense that simplify complex issues by reducing complexity (Wolf, 2017). During differentiation, six subcategories were developed: *Irrational Causality*, *Friend-Enemy Dichotomy*, *Suggesting Situations*, *Extremism*, *Denial/Doubt of Scientific Findings* and *Simplified Solutions*. These subcategories highlight how the AfD deliberately reduces complex content and thereby substantiates seemingly existing situations without the necessary basis.

The main category *Disposition to Radical Solutions* was developed due to the tendency of populist communication to reject small steps and instead strive for simple solutions (Decker

& Lewandowsky, 2017). In the process of analysis, the main category was expanded by five subcategories; *Call for Unconventional Measures*, *AfD as the Only Solution*, *Claim of the Absolute of One Solution*, *Urgency Rhetoric*, *Contempt/Rejection of Compromises*. A clear illustration of the AfD's portrayal of itself as a singular, viable solution is provided by the following quote: "We want nobody to have to pay for something they don't want to see. There is only liberation with the AfD, [...] with the CDU [Christian Democratic Union of Germany], it will always continue like this." (mutzurwahrheit90, 09/02/2023[translated]).

The analysis shows that the AfD employs provocative communication. This is evident in the party's disregard for political etiquette, use of aggressive and insulting language, exaggeration, direct verbal attacks on individuals and accusations, as well as irony and sarcasm. The results demonstrate how the AfD attempts to differentiate itself from the political elite and attract attention through various communicative strategies, including polemics, sarcasm, and the relativization of important issues. This serves to discredit political opponents and simplify complex societal problems by portraying certain groups or ideas as the alleged cause of grievances. The party employs populist rhetoric to simplify political issues through logical fallacies and complexity reduction, which undermines the rational and scientific basis of political discussions and promotes the spread of its own ideologies. The interpretation of the results provides insight into the potential communication strategy of the AfD on TikTok. The AfD deliberately employs populist stylistic devices to differentiate itself from established political actors and effectively frame its themes. It is evident that the communicated solutions are either formulated in a radical manner or treated in a superficial manner. Based on these observations, it can be postulated that the AfD on TikTok pursues a communication strategy aimed at disseminating simple messages to promote its political agenda and appeal to potential followers. The identification and categorization of stylistic elements in connection with conspiracy theories on TikTok indicates that AfD politicians utilize this platform to disseminate specific narratives and create an atmosphere of mistrust and threat. In consideration of the aforementioned results and considerations, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H2: *The AfD utilizes populist and conspiratorial stylistic devices on TikTok to present radical solutions in a simplified manner.*

RQ3

To answer the third research question "*To what extent does the AfD on TikTok adapt current platform rules for the dissemination of right-wing populist messages?*", five main categories were formed deductively.

The main category *Interactive Methodological Elements* describes which interactive methods the AfD uses strategically in its right-wing populist communication to stimulate potential recipient interaction. TikTok offers functions such as duet or stitch, hashtag challenges, polls, or surveys (TikTok, 2023). Based on the observations, it can be concluded that the AfD

specifically uses interactive elements in its videos and aims to present complex narratives in easily consumable videos by incorporating other types of media. Articles and statistics simplify the communication of their messages. It is particularly noticeable that the AfD makes little to no use of TikTok's platform-specific interactive functions.

Further, the main category *AudioVisual Methodological Elements* describes the various audio-visual elements used by the AfD on TikTok to strategically communicate their right-wing populist messages. These audio and visual elements can be memes, gifs, targeted branding such as logos and colors, as well as environment and context, loops or music, and sounds (TikTok, 2023). The AfD uses audio-visual methodical elements in its TikTok communication. Depending on the accounts observed, TikTok branding elements such as colors, logos, or account brands can be partially localized. The AfD's videos can often be assigned to the parliament environment. The AfD recycles its speeches from the Bundestag and party conferences by converting them into TikTok videos. This targeted use of parliamentary speeches could be due to the fact that the AfD is trying to create the feeling of being actively involved or of being an active participant in the political discourse against the elite.

Focusing on textual elements, the main category *Text Technology* covers platform-specific technical options for incorporating text elements, as well as those generated by external software and embedded within videos. Additionally, it encompasses elements such as hashtags, stickers, emojis, and video captions (TikTok, 2023). The AfD videos contain text modules that boldly summarize the content of the video. Moreover, the AfD uses subtitles on TikTok. This provides that the spoken content is accessible to a wider audience. Regarding that, the AfD largely uses text techniques to underline and emphasize its statements.

Additionally, the main category *Video Technique* covers both external software solutions used before uploading and video editing using TikTok's editing features, explaining the choice and application of video techniques. The primary purpose of TikTok's video technology is the production and distribution of imaginative, brief, and immersive video content. It can be observed, that the AfD makes an effort to adapt its messaging to fit the characteristics of the platform both technically and content-wise. The AfD adapts platform-specific rules regarding video technology, whereas breaks with the rules, e.g. by using the horizontal format.

TikTok users can use the original sound of the video or add the platform's music offering, sound effects, audio clips, or their own song snippets (TikTok, 2023). The main category *Audio Technique* describes the different audio techniques used. Regarding that, it can be concluded that the AfD prefers to use the original audio and neglects the use of separate audio elements. By using the original audio, there is no connection to the adaptation of existing audio trends on TikTok. This suggests that the focus is more on the content of the core message and less on the entertainment factor. The accounts used for the analysis differ in terms of their

adaptation to the rules of the TikTok platform. This in turn leads to different degrees of professionalization of the account owners.

Based on the results and considerations presented, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H3: *The AfD selectively adapts its TikTok communication to the platform's rules, whereby it deliberately ignores trends and interactive functions to maintain recognition and increase the credibility of its messages through intimacy with its recipients.*

Limitations

In conclusion, it is necessary to acknowledge potential limitations in the methodological approach. The critique notes methodological limitations due to TikTok's non-transparent algorithms, which affect content visibility and analysis, particularly concerning the AfD's impact on younger audiences. This limitation makes it challenging to draw clear conclusions about the targeting of young (potential) voters. Additionally, the algorithms are subject to change, potentially affecting the consistency of data collection and analysis over time. Qualitative content analysis categorizes content based on inherent characteristics but is inherently subjective as categories are defined by researchers, influenced by their biases. Through the process of self-reflection and discourse within the research group, personal biases were identified and subsequently addressed. The study also faces potential sampling bias, as the selected TikTok content may not represent the entire user base or the full range of AfD activities. Temporal limitations, stemming from data collection within a specific timeframe, further constrain the generalizability of findings. In addition to the aforementioned analysis, the evaluation of results is susceptible to overinterpretation and misinterpretation due to a lack of expertise. To mitigate this, the research group engaged in continuous discussion of the results and alternation of research questions within the group. Nevertheless, quality was enhanced through the use of consensual coding, the involvement of multiple coders, and the provision of clear documentation. Intercoder reliability was measured to ensure consistency.

In conclusion, it is only possible to make assumptions, and no representative statements can be made due to the selected method. The findings are specific to the sample and methodological constraints, limiting their generalizability to broader contexts or populations.

Conclusion

This research project examined the right-wing populist communication of the party AfD on the social media platform TikTok. The first research question addressed the content and topics of the AfD's political communication. The topics of security, anti-establishment attitudes,

and identity politics, which are common for right-wing populist parties, were assessed. In the area of security, topics such as financial security, crime, war, and restrictions on freedom were identified. The party establishes a general feeling of insecurity by trying to raise existential and future fears. Of particular importance for the AfD's communication on TikTok is its anti-establishment attitude. It claims, among other statements, that the government is encroaching on the private property and pension entitlements of citizens and taxpayers and is pursuing a comprehensive program of national impoverishment and expropriation. As part of right-wing populist identity politics, the AfD shares its racist convictions. The party communicatively advocates the closing of borders and a stricter deportation policy. The enemy is clear: migrants. They are accused of increased criminality, which would manifest itself in the form of rape, clan crime and murders.

Using framing theory, it is possible to examine how the AfD presents these topics within the frames of TikTok, which leads to the second research question. The AfD uses various populist stylistic elements. It relies on provocation, conspiracy rhetoric, emotionalization, and fearmongering. The creation of an enemy image is reinforced by stylistic means such as emphasizing the dichotomy of 'us versus them', accusations, and the particularly negative highlighting of marginalized groups. The AfD simplifies complex issues and works with logical errors and radical solutions.

The research shows that the audiovisual strategy used by AfD politicians contradicts what TikTok recommends. What is particularly noticeable is the stringent integration of branding in the form of colors, logos, and visual identity features. In this way, the AfD creates a recognition effect. In terms of audiovisual and technical aspects, the AfD accounts indicate a varying degree of professionalization. The analysis of 120 videos revealed that the AfD prioritizes core message content over entertainment. The party rarely uses TikTok's interactive functions, trends, or background music, instead opting for original sound and minimal entertaining elements.

Based on the results presented, the research question "*To what extent does the AfD use TikTok in its communication to attract young voters?*" can be answered as follows: The party specifically chooses content to appeal to young people directly. They raise concerns about public safety, such as financial stability, fighting crime, the consequences of war, and restrictions on personal freedoms. These issues are designed to raise existential fears and create a climate of insecurity, which the AfD uses as a political opportunity to spread its political agenda. It adopts an anti-establishment attitude aimed at building mistrust of the established system and presenting the AfD as an ideal solution. It also pursues racist identity politics. The contrast between the AfD's content and TikTok's recommendation means that it is not perceived as native. This in turn can mean that the AfD stands out in comparison to other

communicators on the platform. In summary, the research shows that TikTok plays a crucial role in reaching potential voters.

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Emotionality and fact orientation in environmental activism

A comparative content analysis of the communication of Fridays for Future and the Last Generation on Instagram

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Abstract

The increasing threat of climate change is particularly characterized in public discourse in Germany by the environmental activism of Fridays For Future and Letzte Generation (translated: Last Generation). Both environmental movements mobilize by communicating the causes of problems, approaches to solutions and possible ways to motivate people. Although emotionalized and fact-oriented communication suggests a significant influence on this, the topic has not yet been researched. A comparative content analysis of 283 image and video posts from both climate protest movements on Instagram from 2023 revealed the predominant role of anger, determination, despair and regret in the diagnostic and prognostic attribution of both movements. Determination, hope and gratitude could be identified in the motivational function of the communication of both activist groups. While Letzte Generation often makes negative emotional statements, Fridays For Future is characterized by a more positive emotionality. Particularly with regard to the attribution of problems, both movements consistently refer to facts, whereby Letzte Generation in particular explicitly refers to sources. The work provides insights into the role of emotionality and fact orientation in a comparison of the two currently most relevant German climate protest movements. It thus offers a starting point for further research into the mobilization communication of environmental movements.
Keywords: Emotionality, fact orientation, collective action framing, environmental activism

Introduction

The climate crisis is one of the greatest threats to human well-being and the health of the planet (Lee et al., 2023). Yet, the generation of politicians now seems to take the crisis lightly and does not pursue a political solution in all seriousness (The Lancet Planetary Health, 2024). This highlights the need for society, often felt by young people in particular, to increase pressure on politicians (Skeirytė et al., 2022). Young environmental activists take to the streets, manage to mobilize masses of people, and risk prosecution by the judiciary with actions of civil disobedience (Buzogány & Scherhaufer, 2022; De Moor et al., 2021). The main

aim of these actions is in times of permanent crises to maintain media attention for the effects of climate change and thus also to constantly increase the pressure on politicians (Buzogány & Scherhaufer, 2022; De Moor et al., 2021). In Germany, two activist groups are particularly well known: Fridays For Future (FFF) and Letzte Generation (translated: Last Generation, LG). Although both groups are environmental movements that emerged from the need to tackle the climate crisis, they differ considerably in some respects, particularly in their choice of means of protest (Rucht, 2023a). While FFF gained notoriety through school strikes and continues to rely on peaceful protests today, LG employs more radical courses of action (Rucht, 2023a). The activists obstruct traffic by gluing themselves to roads or throwing food or orange paint at paintings in museums (Rucht, 2023a). This differentiation suggests that it may be interesting to examine the ways in which these two movements communicate, particularly on social media.

Environmental movements use social media to mobilize and disseminate information (Boulianne et al., 2020). These provide the advantage of swift and effortless information dissemination (Boulianne et al., 2020). While research on climate change communication in social media has predominantly concentrated on the text-based platform X (formerly Twitter), exploration of visual-based social media like Instagram, and broader investigation into visual components of environmental communication, has been sporadic (Pearce et al., 2019). The textual and visual components of communication depict how social movements portray themselves and climate change (Pearce et al., 2019). Their presentation significantly influences how situations are perceived and understood, a concept known as framing. Frames are "action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns" (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137). While the framing of FFF has been extensively studied, further research is warranted for the recently established Letzte Generation (Buzogány & Scherhaufer, 2022; Svensson & Wahlström, 2023). The distinct forms of environmental activism between these two groups, particularly regarding their protest tactics, imply different framing strategies.

Emotions elicited by climate change significantly influence attitudes and behaviors, notably impacting support for eco-friendly policies and involvement in environmental activism (Feldman & Hart, 2016; Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014). Consequently, this also influences protest practices. Conversely, fact orientation, characterized by a factual, objective, and comprehensive portrayal of information, contrasts with emotionality (Pointner, 2010). Given the existential threat posed by climate change, it is reasonable to consider it both an emotional and scientific, fact-oriented issue. This opens a field of tension that has not yet been researched in the context of the climate protest movements that are most present in the media in Germany. To address this research gap, a comparative qualitative content analysis following the methodology outlined by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) is employed. 283 image and video posts extracted from

the German Instagram channels of FFF and LG were conducted. This study aims to investigate the following research leading question: *What role do emotionality and fact orientation play in the framing of FFF Germany and LG in their communication on Instagram?*

Theory

Social movements can be defined as a network of interactions between individuals or groups who share a common interest and become politically active to achieve it (Diani, 1992; Herrmann et al., 2023). They draw attention to injustices and conflicts, raise public awareness, and increase public pressure on policymakers (Buzogány & Scherhaufer, 2022). The decentralized organizational structure, devoid of clear hierarchies and division of labor, is therefore a defining feature (Rucht, 2023b). Herman et al. (2023) argue that environmental movements belong to the most influential social movements because they have been involved in the emergence of green parties, significantly influenced nuclear power policy, and established environmental protection as a social value. Environmental movements engage in environmental activism, which involves collective civic action aimed at addressing environmental problems at a systemic level that goes beyond changing individual behavior (Alisat & Riemer, 2015). This research focuses on the two groups FFF and LG.

Greta Thunberg, the initiator of the FFF movement, started skipping school in August 2018 and instead sat in front of the Swedish parliament to protest politicians' inaction in the face of advancing global warming. Her actions were disseminated globally through the media, and as time passed, an increasing number of supporters joined the movement. By 2019 it had become a global phenomenon, mobilizing millions of people from over a hundred countries (Wahlström et al., 2020). In Germany, the movement reached its peak in terms of mass mobilization and public impact in September 2019, with reportedly 1.4 million protesters on the third Global Day of Action (Rucht, 2023a). The integration of highly committed individuals with less committed individuals characterizes the protests (Svensson & Wahlström, 2023). As a means of protest, FFF relies on peaceful strikes and dialog (Rucht, 2023a). The prevailing message of the movement is that politics should listen to science and act on it (Evensen, 2019).

However, groundbreaking and forward-looking successes have failed to materialize, and the movement's mobilizing power is waning (Rucht, 2023a). Another challenge is the lack of a clear command structure. This is because different leaders are espousing divergent political opinions, which is negatively impacting their public image. The most recent example of this is Greta Thunberg's stance on the Israel conflict (Schneider & Toyka-Seid, 2024). The resulting dissatisfaction leads to the question of how to give more weight to climate policy demands and how to increase pressure on political decision-makers. These considerations can be interpreted as a starting point for the formation of new movements that no longer consider peaceful strikes to be effective, but instead focus on rule-breaking actions (Rucht, 2023a). In Germany,

these include Extinction Rebellion and in particular, the recently formed LG (Rucht, 2023a). In contrast to the peaceful start of the movement at FFF, LG has been using more radical means from the beginning, such as hunger strikes and blockades (Rucht, 2023a). Compared to the mass protests of FFF, the street blockade as a means of protest requires only six to ten activists. To prevent the rapid dispersal of a protest by police, the activists typically stick their hands with super glue to the road at intersections, leading to arrests and prosecution by the police. While politicians label the group "climate terrorists", LG sees itself as an advocate of non-violent protest, employing civil disobedience (Rucht, 2023a). Rucht (2023a) defines civil disobedience as "a strictly non-violent breaking of rules or laws" (p. 12). This form of protest is primarily aimed at creating media resonance (Rucht, 2023a). LG mobilizes relatively few, but highly motivated activists who carry out actions in small groups (Rucht, 2023a). In contrast, FFF focuses on mass mobilization. The substantive demands of LG (such as cheaper public transportation) are not very radical and overlap with those of FFF (Rucht, 2023a).

Framing

Frames are elements and principles that guide and significantly influence the view and interpretation of situations (Goffman, 1974). They can therefore be understood as an interpretative framework. In this context, framing is understood as the production and dissemination of frames (Reese, 2008). The original core objective of the framing approach is the qualitative-oriented analysis of texts (Goffman, 1974). In communication studies, it is mainly applied in the field of media reception and impact research. Here, the framing approach can be used to examine the effects of framed media content on recipients. In the course of this, framing can also be understood as a conscious control instrument, through which desired reactions, such as approval, rejection, indignation or encouragement, are to be evoked on the part of the recipients. This is particularly relevant when mobilizing collectives (Snow & Benford, 1988).

Depending on the object of investigation and research discipline, numerous framing approaches have now emerged that enable the in-depth analysis of a wide range of structures and social phenomena. Benford and Snow's (1988, 1992) collective action frames, for example, provide information about the production and reproduction of cultural patterns of interpretation that social movements use to mobilize their supporters. In general: "Frames enable individuals, groups and organizations to interpret the world around them" (Gahan & Pekarek, 2013, p. 761). The collective action frames described below by Benford and Snow (1988, 1992) show how this works in concrete terms using the example of social movements.

The authors describe collective action frames as a collective interpretative framework, i.e. as an "action-oriented set of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614).

With the help of the framing concept of collective action frames, three central questions can be examined:

1. By what characteristic features is the interpretive framing of protest movements characterized?

2. On which factors does its mobilization potential depend?

3. What options are available to the actors involved to improve the impact of their interpretative frame? (Kern, 2008, p. 142)

All three questions demonstrate that framing is a crucial component in various areas of the mobilization process (Snow & Benford, 1988). A detailed look at the design of collective action frames shows that Snow and Benford differentiate between three core tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing and motivational framing (1988, 1992). Diagnostic framing focuses on identifying the problem, the causes and the responsible parties (Snow & Benford, 1988). Prognostic framing refers to the development of solutions, approaches to solutions and strategies for their implementation (Benford & Snow, 2000). The third core task, motivational framing, aims to persuade target groups to participate in community actions (Snow & Benford, 1988).

Framing in environmental activism

A study by De Moor et al. (2021) on the framing of the environmental movements FFF and Extinction Rebellion (XR) shows that both environmental movements have a similar diagnostic framing. FFF and XR agree that global warming is made by humans (De Moor et al., 2021). FFF assigns responsibility for the climate crisis to politicians, criticizing their passivity. XR chooses a different approach by pointing out that the system is toxic and no individuals are to blame. With regard to prognostic framing, both FFF and XR see the solution in the fact that political decision-makers must recognize climate science findings and, based on these, introduce measures that effectively reduce greenhouse gas emissions (De Moor et al., 2021). In terms of motivational framing, both FFF and XR emphasize the relevance and power of collective mobilization.

While the framing of environmental movements in general and FFF in particular has been researched comparatively extensively (Maier, 2019; Svensson & Wahlström, 2023), there is hardly any research in this regard on LG. Possible explanations for this are the relative novelty of the group and the restriction of its activities to Germany and Austria. To the authors' knowledge, there are no studies that compare the framing of FFF and LG. This is a research gap that will be filled in the context of this study.

The study by Buzogány and Scherhaufer (2022), which compares the framing of FFF and XR, can provide an approach to the topic. As an independent group within the environmental movement, XR cannot be equated with LG. But both movements were founded in

response to the failed mass protests of FFF, with the aim of increasing pressure on political decision-makers through rule-breaking actions (Rucht, 2023a). Therefore, a certain similarity in approach between XR and LG can be assumed. Buzogány & Scherhaufer (2022) conclude that the diagnostic and prognostic frames of FFF and the concrete actions of the group align more closely with the mainstream discourse than those of XR. As a result, FFF activists are regarded as important interlocutors, and their demands are reflected in mainstream political debates. In contrast, XR is often perceived as too radical or utopian for the German political system (Buzogány & Scherhaufer, 2022).

Activism communication on social media

Research on social movements such as the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter has demonstrated the potential of social media as a tool for mobilizing, informing, and recruiting new members for social movements (Theocharis et al., 2015). The role of social media as a means of bypassing the gatekeeper function of traditional media and enabling the expression of opinions and demands to a global audience is a significant factor in the mobilization of social movements (Boulianne et al., 2020). Social media can thus be considered an indispensable component of the mobilization process (Maher & Earl, 2019).

Instagram is a well-established social media platform with approximately two billion users worldwide (*Social Networks nach Nutzern 2024*, 2024). FFF and LG both have high follower numbers (67,000 followers on the LG account and over half a million followers on the FFF Germany account). Instagram is particularly characterized by its focus on visual media content (Haq et al., 2022). The platform mainly serves a young audience; in Germany, 78 % of 16- to 19-year-olds use Instagram (*Instagram - Nutzerstruktur nach Altersgruppen in Deutschland 2022*, 2022). Since many young people belong to LG and FFF, it can be assumed that there is a broad overlap between Instagram users and activists. Conversely, visual platforms have been largely overlooked in research on climate change communication (Pearce et al., 2019). Studies that have examined Instagram have frequently been limited to textual elements or focused on individuals within the movement, rather than environmental movements as a whole (Molder et al., 2022). This study aims to address this gap and compares the two environmental movements, FFF and LG.

Emotionality

Social movement researchers consider emotions to be a particularly important factor in understanding how social movements initiate, sustain, or end activism. Emotions can be both a trigger for initiating and supporting mobilization, protest, and resistance, as well as an inhibiting factor (Jasper, 2011). In essence, emotions can be conceptualized as a "form of human experience as a short-term reaction to internal (e.g. memories) or external (e.g. threats) events" (Klimmt, 2013, p. 70). In line with the approach proposed by Kleres and

Wettergren (2017), emotions are conceptualized as conscious and unconscious information and motivation processes underlying rational action and decision-making. This paper employs the term "emotions" in a collective sense, in accordance with the perspective put forth by González-Hildalgo and Zografos (2020). This approach is based on the everyday understanding of emotions and, as a result, no distinction is made in this paper between emotions, affects, moods, and feelings (González-Hildalgo & Zografos, 2020). The primary focus of this study is on the repertoire of emotions utilized, which is why the often-used conceptual distinction between emotions and affects is not discussed in detail (Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014).

The consideration of emotions in the context of environmental activism is important because emotions experienced in the context of climate change are crucial for attitudes and behaviors. For example, numerous studies have demonstrated that emotions, most notably hope, are strongly related to activist engagement (Feldman & Hart, 2016; Ojala, 2012; Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014). Although emotions are well-researched in relation to messaging in the climate context, there is less research on how environmental movements use emotions in their messaging. Currently, there is a gap in research on whether and to what extent environmental movements use emotions in their communication. This paper attempts to close this research gap.

Fact orientation

Fact orientation is understood as "that which is known (or firmly believed) to be real or true […] [or something that] has actually happened or is the case" (*Fact - Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.). Orientation towards facts can therefore be defined as recourse or reference to verifiable facts (Strohschein, 2022, p. 194). In the context of this paper, fact orientation can be considered as the opposite of conjecture, interpretation or speculation (Pointner, 2010). In the political context, fact orientation is primarily defined in contrast to emotions and emotionality, often also in distinction with society's rejection of science (Durnová, 2019) and disinformation (Bernhard et al., 2024). Following on from this, a recent study by the Bertelsmann Foundation examines, for example, the population's perception of disinformation: the study concludes that respondents are more frequently confronted with disinformation when it comes to particularly controversial topics such as migration, war or climate change (Bernhard et al., 2024). However, respondents consider the need for truthful facts to be particularly high for these topics (Bernhard et al., 2024). In addition, technological developments and the growing influence of social media increase the potential for misinformation to deceive (Bernhard et al., 2024).

The concept of fact orientation has not yet been sufficiently researched in the area of communication by social (protest) movements. Although there are a few studies – mainly in political science – that analyze protest movements, such as the "March for Science" in the USA, with regard to the role of factuality and emotions (Durnová, 2019), this is done purely on a socio-political level and not on a communication science level. The communication science

perspective thus represents a research gap that can be approached with the help of the above definitions. Based on those definitions, fact orientation in the context of the communication of social protest movements can then be identified, for example, in the citation of well-founded studies or in the reference to statements by recognized scientists.

Methodology

In order to address the research leading question, three sub-questions are employed to provide further insight into the various dimensions.

RQ1: *What role do emotionality and fact orientation play in the framing of communication by FFF Germany on Instagram?*

RQ2: *What role do emotionality and fact orientation play in the framing of communication by LG on Instagram?*

RQ3: *How do FFF Germany and LG differ in terms of emotionality and fact orientation in the framing of their communication on Instagram?*

To answer the research questions, a comparative qualitative content analysis was conducted in accordance with the methodology proposed by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). This method allows for the uncovering of both manifest and latent content. For this purpose, a category system was created whose categories were formed both deductively and inductively with the aim of forming hypotheses. The deductively formed categories form a basis for the analysis and thus represent the operationalization of the research question (Springer et al., 2015). The exact definition of the various categories was recorded in a codebook. The category system comprises the main categories of *emotionality*, *fact orientation* and *collective action frames*. The deductive main categories *emotionality* and *fact orientation* result from the research questions and each have inductive subcategories. The *collective action frames* include the functions of diagnostic framing, prognostic framing and motivational framing. These three functions serve deductively as components of the individual frames (Snow & Benford, 1988, 1992). A prerequisite for the formation of the frames is that at least two of the three functions are fulfilled. In the course of the analysis, inductive categories emerge from the characteristics of the various functions.

The study is based on a sample drawn from the channels *@fridaysforfuture.de* (Fridaysforfuture.de, 2024) and *@letztegeneration* (Letztegeneration, 2024) on the social media platform Instagram. For each channel, 12 posts from each month of the year 2023 were chosen at random, 75% of which were image posts and 25% video posts. This resulted in a sample of 283 posts in total. The sample was examined by five coders, whereby intersubjective traceability was ensured (Brosius et al., 2022). The results of the coding of the two channels were

compared with each other to identify the communication patterns and differences between the two organizations. To answer the research questions, the emotionality and fact orientation within the collective action frames were analyzed separately and then compared.

Results

The subsequent section will explore the relationship between emotionality and fact-orientation in environmental activism, contextualizing this within the broader framework of collective action. The frames between the two activist groups, FFF and LG, are first considered separately and then compared.

Information events and actions (FFF)

FFF identifies the external circumstances of climate activism, e.g. the oppression of climate activists in Germany, as a problem. The activist group names the government's behavior and its lack of climate protection in the diagnostic framing as the cause of the climate movement. As one solution to these issues, FFF states that climate activism should be secure, especially in times of climate crisis. Another solution is participation in the climate movement. To encourage the target group to support and participate in the climate movement and its events, such as the global climate strike, the emotions of joy and determination are employed.

Phasing out fossil fuels (FFF)

FFF perceives the use and impact of fossil fuels as a problem: they cause greenhouse gases, are demonstrably harmful to the climate and fuels, such as coal, are mined in excess. Government actions exacerbate this issue through agreements with businesses. Politics is both blamed for and seen as a potential solution to climate change. Another proposed solution is the phase-out of fossil fuels. These solutions are communicated as fact-oriented statements which run through the entire collective action frame and are accompanied by the emotions of determination, anger, and indignation. To underscore the importance of the fossil fuel phase-out further emotions such as sarcasm and derision, incomprehension and horror, fear, as well as joy, love, and hope for improvement are used. The emotions of shock, regret, respect and recognition are used to highlight the activist group's hope that the government will commit to a fossil fuel phase-out at the World Climate Conference and join the High Ambition Coalition to commit to the 1.5 degree target.

Other potential solutions for phasing out fossil fuels include further protest actions that are emphasized with the fact that climate change threatens the livelihoods of numerous individuals through natural disasters. The facts are accompanied by the emotions of hope and shock, which can also be found in the motivational frame function of participating in the activist group, typically mentioned at the conclusion or commencement of a post. The described fact

orientation and the emotions of determination and anger also run through the various frame functions in this frame.

Mobility transition (FFF)

FFF is determined that it is a problem that many political investments are planned for the expansion of roads, while working conditions and the state of public transport urgently need to be improved. This is emphasized by anger, indignation, sarcasm and derision. The activists attribute responsibility to the government and politicians. The German Minister of Transport, Volker Wissing, and his actions are particularly emphasized, with him being accused of refusing to work, supported by additional emotions of determination and incomprehension.

The activist group is dedicated to the implementation of a mobility turnaround, which it considers to be a matter of urgency. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for the Ministry of Transport to undergo a change, which is highlighted by the emotions of determination, anger and indignation, sarcasm and derision, joy and gratitude. The emotions of pride, love and hope resonate with the solution approaches.

FFF uses the emotions of joy and gratitude that citizens recognize these problems and are committed to the change. FFF employs motivational framing to persuade the target group to take part and participate in the protest actions, using the emotions of determination, anger and indignation, as well as joy, love, pride and gratitude. The entire frame is based on several facts, which present the mobility transition as such: politics, emissions and the economy are cited as the reasons for climate change. The climate activists leave no doubt that future mobility will be sustainable and public, which needs more investments in public transport.

Climate Protection (FFF)

The climate crisis and its ecological and social consequences are at the center of this frame and it is described as diagnostic frame function, which is accompanied by the emotions of determination, anger/indignation, regret, incomprehension/disgust, sarcasm/mockery, but also by positive feelings such as joy, pride and hope. The government and the economy are named as the responsible parties. FFF reacts with anger and indignation to the planned abolition of the sector targets in the government's climate protection law. The government's missed climate targets are substantiated as fact by reports from the Federal Environment Agency. The activist group is determined not to allow the government to fail to meet the 1.5 degree target and regrets the political course on climate protection. One solution is therefore the government's support for climate protection, which is accompanied by the emotions of determination, anger and indignation, incomprehension and horror.

The activist group uses the same emotions as for the diagnostic frame function, with the emotions of determination, anger and indignation being more prominent to state that politics is a solution to climate change while the protest actions within the climate movement are

a solution for climate protection. The positive emotions of joy, pride and hope give the climate movement a sense of community and encourage citizens to participate in protest actions and information events. The reference to fact orientation runs through all frame functions highlighting the already high impact of the climate crisis on our lives and the earth. Further facts are used to emphasize the importance of politics for climate protection and to call for a reduction in emissions.

Political course in need of change (FFF)

As a major problem FFF diagnoses the climate-damaging policy course of the government, e.g. its failure to comply with the Paris Climate Agreement. FFF is annoyed and outraged by the current government and reacts to political events with sarcasm and derision in its contributions. The members of FFF are portrayed ambivalently. They move between being full of fear and despair and being proud and hopeful.

To illustrate the grievances in politics, facts such as the Paris Climate Agreement are mentioned and it is pointed out that the government is responsible for complying with it – thus politics is named as the reason for climate change. At the same time, the destruction of livelihoods is described as a fact-based consequence of climate change. To solve this problem, FFF proposes to change the government's course, which is backed up with facts such as the phase out of fossil fuels. The statement that politicians should drive forward climate protection is supported by the emotions of determination, anger and indignation, fear, despair, pride, joy and sarcasm or mockery. In addition, this solution is underlined by the fact that politics is part of the causes of climate change and therefore part of the solutions. FFF calls for protest actions and participation in these as well as in the movement itself to ensure that the politicians can no longer ignore the activists. In this motivational frame function FFF refers to the fact that politics is the cause of and solution to climate change and also refers to the ambivalent feelings of activists during participation in demonstrations.

Statements on current grievances (FFF)

In addition to addressing the issue of climate change, FFF also addresses other forms of grievance like the war between the Hamas and Israel or the outdated school system. The activist group ascribes a sense of historic responsibility to itself, which is accompanied by a range of emotions including determination, despair, solidarity, and sadness. In the context of the outdated school system, the fact-oriented statement that the economy is a cause of climate change is mentioned. The call for individual initiative and participation in community actions is resolutely aimed at encouraging the target group to take joint action.

Information events and campaigns (LG)

In this collective action frame, LG addresses the tension between police and climate activists. The attribution of the problem by politicians is repeated here as fact, often coupled

with a sense of misunderstanding. Within this frame, determination for protest actions serves as an emotionally charged means of communication. As a solution, reference is made to the movement's working groups, with guidance on how to familiarize oneself with protest practices. Additionally, gratitude is expressed for the support received thus far.

Phasing out fossil fuels (LG)

The LG blames fossil fuels for climate change, targeting both the German energy company RWE and the government for the support of harmful activities. Determination is evident as LG members oppose the government's fossil fuel agenda in relation to the diagnostic frame functions. Protest actions are highlighted by scenes of protesters being removed, evoking despair, regret, and anger. Sarcasm dramatizes the issue's gravity. Facts support these claims, including the government's disregard for science and violations of climate laws. Facts are presented as established truths. The proposed solution is to phase out fossil fuels through political advocacy and structural change. Emotions of anger, regret, despair and sarcasm align with this frame function as well. These emotions serve as responses to previous climate protection measures. Other facts predict future fossil fuel extraction exceeding the 1.5-degree target, and that proposed solutions will be politically managed by a societal council. Again, no sources are given. Determination is particularly emphasized in the motivational function.

Mobility transition (LG)

The frame for mobility transition, which holds politicians and the government responsible for ensuring climate-friendly transportation, is only addressed by the LG in a single post. It criticizes a political party's proposal to build more motorway lanes, advocating instead for expanding public transport for climate-friendly transportation. The post highlights the anger of a protester and references a fact-check from a tech portal to substantiate the argument about problematic car traffic.

Climate Protection (LG)

The climate protection frame addresses the government's role in climate change, expressing anger and despair over their perceived inaction. Negative emotions highlighting the magnitude of identified climate change problems are often contrasted with positive feelings to create a perspective and a sense of unity. Determination is evident throughout, particularly in the motivational frame dimension. In addition, there is a strong fact orientation. The problematic handling of climate-related issues by politics and the economy is often presented as a fact.

The most common reference to the effects of climate change is to natural disasters. Floods, droughts, and fires in other countries are used as examples to illustrate the issue. These are mainly discussed in the context of rising temperatures, which form the basis of the argumentation. While natural disasters are presented without sources, references to rising temperatures occasionally cite the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

or a quote from the UN Secretary-General. The latter, besides highlighting the issue, also serves as justification for the climate protest movement.

In the discourse on global warming and natural disasters, the destruction of livelihoods is also presented factually. A physician's statement further emphasizes health consequences in light of the aforementioned IPCC report. On the prognostic dimension of the frame, the climate movement is identified as a solution, advocating for climate-friendly policies and a societal council. The emotional intensity and fact orientation of other frame functions are reflected here as well. Anger and despair are followed by determination and hope. The cited facts center around politics as the cause of the problem and the mentioned consequences of climate change.

Political course in need of change (LG)

The present frame deals with direct criticism of the political course. Anger, despair, and incomprehension highlight the severity of the issue. Following this, determination, gratitude, joy, hope, and pride motivate participation in protest actions and donations. Facts center around blaming politics without referring to sources. Criticism from the UN Secretary-General supports the argument. The proposed solution involves adhering to political goals, supported by factual political commitments. A scientist's quote emphasizes the need for immediate zero emissions. Besides changing political course, the LG views its climate protest movement as a solution, driven by anger, fear, and determination, expressing hope, pride, and gratitude. The UN Secretary-General's quote and the facts blaming politics reinforce the movement's legitimacy.

Threat to livelihood (LG)

To address the threat to human livelihoods, determination, incomprehension, regret, and despair are emotionally expressed. The gravity of the threat is stylistically supported by conveying hopelessness, which accompanies expressions of incomprehension, regret, and despair. Within the same frame, these negative emotions are then met with determination to express the urge to protest. Politics is referred to as the root problem, supported by occasional references to the constitution and climate reports.

Criticism of the wealthy (LG)

The climate protest movement identifies the wealthy as drivers of environmentally harmful behavior. They state that the wealthy are responsible for more emissions, which is not substantiated by sources. The LG highlights natural disasters as a consequence which they connect to the destruction of livelihoods. Alongside the primary problem attribution of wealthy individuals, LG sees the government as an enabling force behind them. They express frustration and incomprehension over the imbalance of luxury compared to the crises for others.

Legal judgements and actions (LG)

Legal judgments against individual members of the protest movement are communicated using negative emotions of anger, fear, sorrow, shock, and incomprehension. These emotions are met with even greater determination, which is based on the conviction of the motives of the climate protest movement and rejects blame attribution. Thus, the cause of the frame draws attention to an endangered future. The group communicates solidarity with the affected members. Throughout the frame, factual evidence is rarely used.

Fundraising activities (LG)

One challenge for the LG is to secure financial support to continue its protest actions and to support the enforcement of its demand for a societal council. Consequently, fundraising efforts are initiated, expressing gratitude for past financial support. Subsequently, future plans are presented within the frame, emphasizing their determination. Occasionally, pride in their own protest actions can also be observed. However, fact orientation is not identified within the frame.

Comparing FFF and LG

While the LG utilizes nine different frames, FFF addresses only six. It is evident that various topics can influence the emotional intensity and fact orientation in communication, making a direct comparison of similar interpretive patterns between the two groups challenging. Both groups conduct informational events to educate about their respective motives and practices and to mobilize members. They attribute the need for protest to politics, viewing it as the root cause of climate policy issues. Problem attribution is presented as factual by both groups, although evidence for these facts is not provided. Additionally, the LG faces confrontations with the police due to their more radical protest practices, conveying a sense of incomprehension toward such governmental reactions. Determination is clearly evident in both groups, though the LG adopts a more serious tone in their determination to appeal to the audience's sense of responsibility, while FFF uses joy to motivate potential participants.

The frame for fossil fuel phase-out is prevalent, with both FFF and LG attributing climate-damaging energy production to coal power plants and government responsibility. Problem attribution lacks sources, with LG emphasizing scientific disregard, climate protection laws and future impacts of climate change and FFF focusing on political blame. LG advocates a societal council for coal phase-out, often depicted with sarcasm or mockery, contrasting with FFF's general political opposition. LG's communication highlights despair and anger, while FFF balances negative emotions with hope and respect. LG's tone is emotionally heavy, contrasting with FFF's hopeful mobilization approach. This suggests LG aims to raise audience awareness of responsibility, while FFF focuses on motivation through positive perspectives.

The mobility transition frame is largely led by FFF. Despite this, all functions of the frame share similarities: Political accountability is highlighted as the core issue, with protest advocated as the means to achieve a just transition. FFF displays a spectrum of emotions, including determination, anger, sarcasm, and misunderstanding in the diagnostic function. Joy, pride, love, hope, and gratitude are evident in the prognostic function. Determination, anger, outrage, joy, love, pride, and gratitude were found in the motivational function. The LG primarily emphasizes determination in their prognostic attribution of protest activities. Fact orientation, particularly in the diagnostic and prognostic functions, is emphasized by FFF. They assert the political neglect of science as a justification for expanding public transportation, while LG refers to a linked fact-check supporting the issue of climate-damaging car traffic.

In the climate protection frame, both movements again highlight the role of politics as the primary cause of climate crises, advocating for a shift to climate-friendly policies to counter natural disasters and livelihood destruction. While expressing similar emotions like anger and determination, LG emphasizes negative sentiments more strongly than FFF, evoking despair, sorrow, and fear but contrasting them stronger with emotions of love, hope, and determination in the motivational function. In contrast, FFF uses milder positive emotions such as joy and pride. Regarding fact orientation, both groups address similar themes, but LG occasionally provides more sources to validate their claims through external sources, referencing reports from the IPCC, statements from the UN Secretary-General, and expert opinions to validate their claims.

In the frame regarding the need for political change, both activist groups identify the government as the problem and push for policy shifts through protests. Emotionally, they express anger, fear, and despair, with FFF also using sarcasm. Both portray their protests positively with pride, joy, determination, gratitude, and hope while blaming politics for the problem. FFF cites the Paris Agreement, while LG relies on the UN Secretary-General's criticism of insufficient political measures. In the prognostic function, FFF mentions the transition from fossil fuels, while LG supports the same argument with a scientist's quote.

Comparing FFF and LG frames on Instagram reveals nuanced differences in emotional tone and factual presentation. In LG's posts, describing the problem is often accompanied by expressions of grief, pain, and courage, which are not found in FFF's posts. LG also emphasizes despair, love, regret, fear, and confusion more frequently. In contrast, FFF often employs humor and sarcasm, absent in LG's messaging.

The four hypotheses were derived from a contextualized consideration of emotionality in the collective action frames:

H1: *The communication of FFF and the LG is characterized by negative emotionalization with regard to the attribution of problems and causes.*

H2: *The communication of FFF and the LG is characterized by a negative emotionalization with regard to the attribution of solutions, which is contrasted by positive feelings.*

H3: *The communication of FFF and the LG is characterized by a positive emotionalization with regard to the motivation intention.*

H4: *In comparison to FFF, the LG mobilization communication is distinguished by a tendency to dramatize negative emotions.*

In their communication on Instagram, both activist groups adopt fact orientation, with the majority of the recognized facts being presented as true and generally valid statements. References to sources or external persons are only sporadically present, with the majority of instances occurring with the LG. This is particularly evident in the collective action frames of mobility transition, climate protection, and the need for policy change. Despite FFF's scientific roots, LG tends to substantiate facts with external sources more extensively. Both groups exhibit a high level of fact orientation, though many statements lack direct citation. In the evaluation, the fact orientation was contextualized within the context of the collective action frames, from which further hypotheses can be derived.

H5: *FFF and the LG are distinguished by their emphasis on fact-oriented communication regarding the identification of problems and causes, as well as the development of solutions.*

H6: *In comparison to FFF, the LG mobilization communication is distinguished by a more pronounced orientation towards sources of information and facts.*

Limitations

As research period, the year 2023 was chosen due to topicality and constant change of the groups. The findings of this qualitative content analysis are therefore limited in their informative value. A longer investigation period could enhance the informative value of the statements and reduce influence of year-specific events. The population only includes the main channels, information from the local groups were not included. A uniform number of posts and videos from each month of both channels was selected for the sample, yet the specified number of videos could not always be considered due to the fact that fewer were posted. Consequently, not all the available information was included in the analysis. To further enhance the informative value of the analysis, other forms of media could be considered or interviews with climate activists could be held to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the activists' communication.

To ensure consistent coding within the five coders, regular comparisons and detailed rules were employed. Still, it was not possible to completely avoid subjective interpretation due

to the ambiguous nature of the contributions. To ensure consistency, frame functions were first coded individually and later aggregated. The frames formed permit a detailed comparison of analogous aspects, as they are situated at disparate levels of abstraction. However, this renders an overarching comparison of the sample in terms of emotionality and fact orientation challenging. Although the results offer insights into these characteristics, they cannot be generalized to the entire communication of activist groups, as the frames only represent the sample.

Conclusion

The communication of FFF and the LG on Instagram was analyzed in terms of emotionality and fact orientation, with the results being contextualized within the framework of collective action frames. Of the ten frames identified, both groups utilize only half, including climate protection, phasing out fossil fuels, mobility transition, political course in need of change, and information events and campaigns. The climate protection frame is employed very often and is utilized by both groups in a relatively equal manner. Other frames, such as phasing out fossil fuels and the mobility transition, are predominantly utilized by FFF, while the frame on the political course in need of change is employed by the LG. As a result, FFF and LG not only use different emotions and fact orientation, but also present fundamentally different topics in their posts.

The analysis of the communication on Instagram by FFF and the LG reveals significant differences. Both movements exhibit a variety of emotions, with determination and anger or indignation being the most common and equally represented in both groups. FFF supports its mobilization intention by using positive emotions such as humor, sarcasm, and mockery to highlight desirable future prospects. In contrast, negative emotions dominate in LG. The exclusive use of sadness and pain by LG serves to underline this difference and indicates a dramatized linguistic formulation of the causes attributed to the problems identified. These different emotional strategies are reflected in the collective action frames of the two movements and could have an influence on their perception and mobilization power. There were also differences between the two groups in terms of fact orientation. A comparison of the fact-orientation indicates that the LG, due to its relatively recent inception and the intensity of public criticism directed at it because of its protest practice, is more likely to rely on evidence of its facts to strengthen and maintain its legitimacy. In contrast, FFF, as an established movement with a broad following and a basic sympathy of the population, is probably less questioned in principle and thus has less need for external validation.

Activism can have a significant impact on the political and economic changes needed to tackle climate change. Successful communication is crucial for mobilizing large masses and exerting social pressure. Examining the emotionality and factu orientation of both groups'

communication on Instagram provides important insights into their strategies and demands. These findings can help political decision-makers to better understand and take into account the concerns of environmental movements. The analysis suggests that, despite more negative emotions, LG communicates just as well-founded and fact-oriented as FFF, which could reduce existing prejudices and emphasize the seriousness of both movements.

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