You Talk, We Listen, Everyone Benefits: A qualitative study of value creation through digital corporate listening for different company sizes on the German market

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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 re-spond 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 re-search 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). Implement-ing 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 main-taining 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. Never-theless, CL activities, like communication departments in general, face the constant challenge of justifying value creation to management (Zerfass et al., 2015). In addition, successful imple-mentation 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 *Com-munication Value Circle* (CVC, Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017), the *Architecture of Listening* (Mac-namara, 2015), the *Seven Canons of Listening* (Macnamara, 2015), and the concept of *Align-ment* (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 assump-tions 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 cho-sen to explore the value creation levels of DCL. Communication professionals from B2C com-panies 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 em-ployees 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
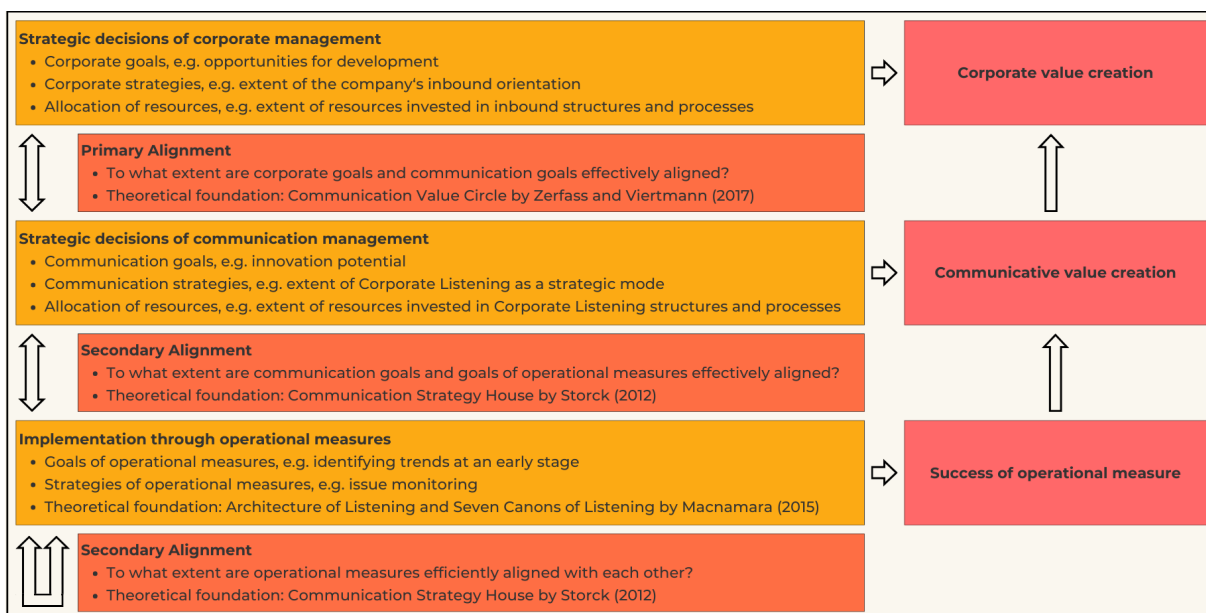
Note. Own illustration based on Borner and Zerfass (2018); Chandler (1969); Drucker (2002); Volk and Zerfass (2018); Zerfass and Viertmann (2017); Zerfass and Volk (2022).

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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