

Self-staging or brand authenticity? A qualitative content analysis of German-language LinkedIn posts by high-reach corporate influencers

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The Dynamics of Digital Influence

Communication Trends in
Business, Politics and Activism

Edited by Alexander Godulla, Christopher Buller,
Vanessa Freudl, Isabel Merz, Johanna Twittenhoff,
Jessica Winkler and Laura Zapke



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Abstract

This research project examines how high-reach corporate influencers (CI) stage themselves 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 activities outside the company, own perspective and own abilities as well as private details. For brand authenticity, these are brand positioning, recruiting, promotion, knowledge sharing, corporate 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 represent the organization on their own digital channels and provide insights into its corporate culture 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 theoretical basis. Nevertheless, this practical interest shows the relevance of CI as an established instrument of corporate communication (DIM, 2023; OMR, 2022). Although influencer marketing 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 (Burmam 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 & Kirchmeier, 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 (Burmam 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 & Kirchmeier, 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 (Burmam 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*

<i>Main category</i>	<i>Definition (short version)</i>
<i>K1_Self-staging</i> <i>K2_Comment self-staging</i>	The category is coded for all meaning units in posts (K1) and comments (K2) that contain aspects of self-staging.
<i>K3_Brand authenticity</i> <i>K4_Comment brand authenticity</i>	The category is coded for all meaning units in posts (K3) and comments (K4) that contain aspects of brand authenticity.
<i>K5_Mixed form</i>	The category is coded if both an aspect of self-staging and brand authenticity are found in a unit of meaning.
<i>K6_neutral</i>	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 & Kirchmeier, 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 interaction with the community and, consequently, the value of dialog over one-sided communication. 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 competence. 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 perspective 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 presentation 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 *appreciation*. These aspects can be interpreted as contributing to a brand's gain in authenticity by improving 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 authenticity 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 understanding 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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