



UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

UNVEILING CLARITY IN A DIGITAL WORLD: TRANSPARENCY IN THE DIGITAL CORPORATE COMMUNICATION OF THE GERMAN AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa
to obtain a Master's Degree in Strategic Communication and
Leadership

By

Lara Cardoso Nunes

Universidade Católica Portuguesa

September 2024



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Abstract

The aim of this master dissertation is to explore the role of perceived transparency in the digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry. For this purpose, a mixed-methods approach was selected, in which a quantitative experimental online survey was conducted among 190 people living in Germany, as well as 10 interviews with communication experts from the automotive industry. After evaluating the online survey, slight differences between digital communication with high and low transparency levels were found. Therefore, the results show that automotive companies that disclose product information are perceived as more transparent than those that do not. However, other than expected, no significant impact of CSR report publication on transparency perception was found. In addition, significant correlations between transparency and corporate reputation as well as trust are recognizable. These findings indicate the importance of digital corporate communication of automotive companies in building a perception of transparency. The results of the conducted interviews confirmed the quantitative findings and showed the important role of transparency regarding building trust and a good corporate reputation, while also pointing out the complexity of the issue and the challenges it poses. Based on the present data, it was also possible to formulate recommendations for the future of automotive digital corporate communication, as well as to present a definition about transparency in digital corporate communication.

Keywords: *Transparency, Digital Corporate Communication, German Automotive Industry, Corporate Social Responsibility, Trust, Corporate Reputation, Social media*

Resumo

O objetivo desta dissertação de mestrado é explorar o papel da transparência percebida na comunicação empresarial digital da indústria automóvel alemã. Para o efeito, foi selecionada uma abordagem de métodos mistos, na qual foi realizado um inquérito experimental quantitativo em linha a 190 pessoas residentes na Alemanha e 10 entrevistas a especialistas em comunicação da indústria automóvel. Após a avaliação do inquérito em linha, foram encontradas ligeiras diferenças entre a comunicação digital com níveis de transparência elevados e baixos. Por conseguinte, os resultados mostram que as empresas do sector automóvel que divulgam informações sobre os seus produtos são consideradas mais transparentes do que as que não o fazem. No entanto, ao contrário do esperado, não foi encontrado um impacto significativo da publicação do relatório de RSE na perceção da transparência. Além disso, são reconhecíveis correlações significativas entre a transparência e a reputação da empresa, bem como a confiança. Estes resultados indicam a importância da transparência na comunicação empresarial digital das empresas do sector automóvel. Os resultados das entrevistas efetuadas confirmaram as conclusões quantitativas e mostraram o papel importante da transparência na construção da confiança e de uma boa reputação empresarial, sublinhando simultaneamente a complexidade da complexidade e os desafios que coloca o assunto. Com base nos dados apresentados, foi também possível formular recomendações para o futuro da comunicação empresarial digital na indústria automóvel e foi apresentada uma definição de transparência na comunicação empresarial digital.

Palavras-chave: *Transparência, comunicação empresarial digital, indústria automóvel alemã, responsabilidade social das empresas, confiança, reputação empresarial, redes sociais*

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When I first started researching about the topic transparency in the digital communication of the German automotive industry in September 2022, I had no idea what was laying ahead.

Almost a year later, not only did I had the pleasure of speaking with some of the most interesting and accomplished experts, I have also realized how fortunate I am to have so many supportive people in my live. Most of them were willing to help me not only with finding the right interview partners, but also with finding participants for an online survey, which required a significant amount of time to complete. Therefore, I would like to thank my family, friends and partner for being my biggest supporters. Their encouragement pushed me to embrace all the challenges of this dissertation and step out of my comfort zone. Thanks to everyone's contributions, I am proud to say that especially the study results reflect the high quality of the participants.

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1. Introduction

“The future of corporate communication is unreservedly digital”

(Luoma-aho & Badham, 2023, p. 1)

In today’s digital world, many organizations have not only understood the need to communicate digitally but also realized the need for transparency in their corporate communication strategies and initiatives both online and offline (Delgado, 2019; Kim & Lee, 2018; Thøger Christensen, 2002). Transparency is increasingly considered necessary by companies for fostering both good relationships and a support system with stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Furthermore, as previous research has shown, employing transparent communication is among the most effective approaches to establish trust and building a good corporate reputation (Jahansoozi, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2018; Rawlins, 2009; Men & Hung-Baesecke, 2015).

Time and time again, individual automotive companies find themselves in the news due to non-transparent communication. This ranges from withholding information to false statements. One of the biggest scandals was the diesel scandal of the VW Group in 2015. Bush (2022) for example claims that this event was a pivotal point in the industry and has led to an increased demand for transparency. Yet, “Made in Germany” is still highly valued, especially when it comes to the production of quality vehicles (*The Automotive Industry in Germany*, 2022). Therefore, Germany continues distinctively to be known for its engineering and innovation in the automotive industry and is also home to some of the most famous car brands in the world such as Volkswagen, BMW, Audi and Mercedes-Benz (*Brand Growth Slows Finds Interbrand’s Best Global Brands Report 2023*, 2023).

Regarding the current challenges that the automotive industry is experiencing, such as complex environmental and safety requirements or supply chain issues, the interest in finding out how transparency can be implemented in the digital corporate communication of German car manufacturers is very high (Majláth & Ricordel, 2021; Wellbrock et al., 2020; Wissuwa & Durach, 2023). Especially since, as Fombrun and Foss (2001) describe it, “Transparency requires communication – a lot of it.” (p. 3) and as the European Communications Monitor 2021 (Zerfaß et al., 2021) shows, most communications departments have recognized the need to use external digital platforms to communicate with stakeholders.

The overarching research question that emerges from the current state of research is, therefore, as follows: *“What role does transparency play in the digital corporate communication of German automotive companies, and how do they implement it?”*

First, the literature review presents the topic of digital corporate communications in general, including its definition, role, strategies and frameworks. Next, the topic of transparency is addressed by defining the term and outlining its role, existing models, strategies and ethical concerns. Finally, the chapter focuses on the German automotive industry and covers sub-chapters such as stakeholder engagement, corporate identity, communication channels, challenges, opportunities and transparency within the industry. Following the literature review section, the empirical approach adopted to fulfill the research goals is presented. Then, the four hypotheses are derived from the literature review, and the research objectives are explained. After, the subject of the study is presented shortly, and the research design is elaborated. Since this research follows a mixed-methods approach, in the following two subchapters the conducted experimental online survey as well as the interview process with 10 communication experts from the automotive industry are described. Then, the extent to which ethical principles were adhered to when conducting the study is reflected upon, as well as other considerations, such as the quality criteria. After, chapter four is devoted to the quantitative and qualitative results presentation, while the discussion in chapter five, also includes the limitations of the study. Finally, a conclusion is drawn.

The findings will contribute to the implementation of transparency in digital corporate communication strategies and provide some recommendations that particular the automotive industry could apply.

2. Literature Review

The following chapters describe relevant definitions, theories, and frameworks that contribute to answer the research question and its sub-questions. In addition, they aim to provide the reader with information about the current state of research on the constructs analyzed.

2.1. Digital Corporate Communication

In order to gain an overview and understanding of digital communication, particularly in the context of corporate communications, significant aspects are going to be examined in the next five subchapters.

First, the term digital communication will be defined, which will help to establish a clear and focused direction for this research. Then, the role of digital communication in corporate communications will be presented. After, the strategies of digital corporate communications will be explained, with a focus on social media and the corporate website. To enrich the understanding and provide valuable insights into the topic of digital corporate communication, lastly, two compelling frameworks are going to be illustrated.

2.1.1. Definition of digital corporate communication

With over five billion people using the internet and 4.8 billion using social media in July 2023, the population worldwide is becoming more and more digital (Petrosyan, 2023). Consequently, companies have had to adapt their corporate communications by thoughtfully coordinating the utilization of their digital channels and also offline channels so that they effectively reach and engage with their stakeholders by adopting integrated communication strategies (Belasen & Belasen, 2019; Cornelissen, 2020; Troise & Camilleri, 2021). Stakeholders can be defined as “individuals, groups, or organizations who may affect, be affected by, or perceive themselves to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a portfolio, program, or project” (Project Management Institute, 2021, p. 31). On the other side, integrated corporate communication holds significant importance as one focuses on formulating consistent messages for stakeholders, maintaining corporate communication narratives across all channels, and harmonizing communication strategies with corporate goals (Belasen & Belasen, 2019; Cornelissen, 2020).

However, to better understand digital corporate communication, it is important to first clarify what corporate communication is. Cornelissen (2020), for example, describes corporate communication as being “a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent” (p. 5). On the other hand, the authors Luoma-aho and Badham (2023) define it as the “organization’s strategic management of communication with internal and external stakeholders and more broadly within society for the maintenance of

organizational tangible and intangible assets” (p. 5). While Cornelissen (2020) focuses on the purpose of corporate communication by emphasizing the need to maintain a good reputation, Luoma-aho and Badham’s (2023) definition explicitly recognizes the role of corporate communication in managing both tangible and intangible assets. This is especially relevant in today's digital age, in which not just reputation is becoming increasingly important for the continuing success of a company, but also several other intangible values, such as the corporate brand, the relationship with stakeholders or human capital as they stand for the future growth and resilience of a company (*Protecting intangible assets: Preparing for a new reality*, 2020). In addition, other intangible aspects that have been growing in importance recently are sustainability, social responsibility, and transparency (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; 2023; Faria, 2023; Zerfaß et al., 2023). These factors are therefore permanent components of the digital corporate communication strategies (Capurro et al., 2023; Reilly & Hynan, 2014; Zerfaß, 2010).

Furthermore, tangible assets such as money or real estate are also taken into account in this definition of digital corporate communication, as these also play a role, above all, in the past and present of a company. Moreover, as research likewise has shown, only a combination of tangible and intangible assets has the power to create competitive advantages among other positive outcomes (Haskel & Westlake, 2017; Kaplan & Norton, 2004).

To be able to understand the term “Digital Corporate Communication” better, one also should know what digital communication is. However, if one starts to search for a definition, it quickly becomes clear that digital communication can be understood in many different ways. Technically speaking, digital communication can be understood as involving “the transmission of information in digital form from a source that generates the information to one or more destinations” (Proakis, 2008, p. 1). Conversely, from a Social Sciences perspective, digital communication can also be described as the interaction that takes place virtually between people that use digital media such as the internet (Baller & Schaller, 2017).

Until recently, there is no established definition of digital corporate communication that is unanimously accepted by academics. Luoma-aho and Badham (2023) have recognized this gap and, above all, understood that it is important to define such term in a way that it fits better to the current requirements spurred on by digitalization. They therefore adjusted the previously described definition taking several attributions of corporate communication and transforming it ultimately to the following definition: “An organization’s strategic

management of digital technologies, digital infrastructures and digitalization processes to improve communication with internal and external stakeholders and more broadly within society for the maintenance of organizational tangible and intangible assets” (p. 5). This definition provides a foundation for understanding corporate communication in today's digital age, as it covers the strategic importance of a good relationship with stakeholders and its role in managing both tangible and intangible assets, which were described before. It therefore serves as a basic definition for the term "digital corporate communication" in this master dissertation.

Furthermore, the focus of this dissertation in particular lies on the channels where external digital corporate communication with the stakeholders of automotive companies such as customers, employees, suppliers, etc. is taking place the most (Bento et al., 2015). Therefore, the study will concentrate on the corporate websites and popular social media networks like Facebook and Instagram, that are the preferred channels of automotive companies (Unmetric, 2019).

2.1.2. Role of digital communication in corporate communication

We live in a world where about two-thirds of the world's population has internet access, and it is expected that the number of people will continue to increase annually (Shewale, 2023). If we take a closer look at Germany, we can see that the trend towards digital media is also continuously increasing here. The ARD-ZDF Mass Communication Trends Study 2023, which was conducted by the German “ARD/ZDF-Forschungskommission” (in English: “ARD/ZDF-Research Commission”) shows, for example, that four out of five Germans are online every day and two-thirds even use digital media every day. Moreover, the study also indicates that more than half communicate digitally with each other. The evolution and usage of digital media has not only transformed the media environment and our daily lives, it also has significantly impacted how companies interact with stakeholders, leading to a change in the methods employed in corporate communications. Although this change brings many opportunities, it also has some challenges. As early as 2019, the European Communication Monitor highlighted that “dealing with the speed and volume of information flow, coping with the digital evolution and the social web, matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources and using big data and/or algorithms for communication” (Zerfaß et al., 2019, p.56) were the issues that were selected

as being the most important for communication. Four years later the newest edition of the European Communication Monitor 2023, highlights that especially the “recent developments in the area of artificial intelligence and applications like ChatGPT, Midjourney, or Synthesia illustrate the fundamental change of communication practices through digital technologies” (Zerfaß et al., 2023, p.15).

However, when talking about the changing media environment, Cornelissen (2020) describes in his book about Corporate Communications one of these benefits of such challenges imposed by digital technologies as the "democratization of the production and dissemination of news on organizations" (p. 37). By this, he means that instead of just communications professionals being able to disseminate content about organizations, social networks also make it easier for employees to share without controlling their own information about their company online to stakeholders. As a result, not only the perception of stakeholders is influenced, but also their behavior towards a company. However, if desired, businesses thus can better engage with stakeholders through multiple digital channels by participating in conversations and sharing their key messages with the public in an interactive way. Compared to traditional ways, that offer mostly a one-way messaging flow such as TV and printed press, this is a big step forward (Cornelissen, 2020). If one also considers that the general interest of the population in traditional media continues to decline, the focus on digital corporate communication becomes more understandable. Especially if one takes Germany into account, the print media in general is struggling with ever-decreasing sales figures every year. For instance, the circulation of daily newspapers in Germany exceeded 19 million in 2012 and decreased to only 14.61 million in 2022 (Davies, 2023). Besides that, the Digital News Report 2023 reveals that instead, the significance of video-based content for news on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube is also growing (Newman et al., 2023). The study by Oltarzhevskiy (2019) also supports these results by emphasizing that traditional mass channels will continue to decline and social media will gain more importance. Corporate media, including digital channels, will play a decisive role in this. Further, the author sees the merging of media formats as an opportunity for effective communication management and suggest that a balanced mix of traditional and innovative channels, including corporate and social media, is crucial for effective communication.

The fact that stakeholders have thus become active participants in corporate communications is also clear from the fact that the term “crowd-casting” has started to be used to describe social media. Cornelissen (2020) explains it by describing that “they enable stakeholders of an organization to self-organize as a ‘crowd’ in order to produce and disseminate content about an organization” (p. 40). Today's media landscape is thus evolving more and more from broadcasting, where stakeholders are more likely to be, to an approach where stakeholders are participants. Crowd-casting therefore allows companies not only to disseminate certain information but also to start discussions to develop new perspectives and solutions (Cornelissen, 2020). Moreover, it is important for every company to have a good relationship with its stakeholders. This means paying attention to their wishes as well as fulfilling their expectations. When used correctly, interaction in digital channels can offer exactly this (Keite, 2019). What should be noted, however, is that time and patience are needed to make this possible (Cornelissen, 2020).

Furthermore, when corporate communication is being planned, it is important that a company has a clear understanding of its identity so that it can be communicated correctly to the public. The corporate identity is what a company wants to communicate to its stakeholders and also how it wants to be perceived by them. Regarding not only its corporate image but also its reputation in general (Cornelissen, 2020). On the other hand, the corporate image is the external perception of a company in the minds of internal and external stakeholders that can have a positive effect on satisfaction, while the reputation is the aggregated assessment that stakeholders make about how well the company fulfills their expectations based on their previous actions (Coombs, 2007; Özkan et al., 2019).

In his book, Keite (2019), for instance, describes corporate identity in the digital age as a construct that rests on three pillars: (1) corporate behavior, (2) corporate design and (3) corporate communications. The pillar of corporate communication for corporate identity is particularly important here, as this is where essential corporate goals, the target group, and the specific content of the corporate messages are created and managed. As a result, this helps create the identity that guides the company's behavior. Consequently, the focus is on the communication, and in today's digital world, different media are used for this purpose. One of the biggest fears of communications managers and corporate identity managers in particular right now is the increasing frequency of crises on social media. In this situation, critical comments about the company can very quickly be exchanged intensively between

users of digital media, which in turn can have a negative impact on the company's image (Keite, 2019).

However, most companies still use social media as part of their corporate communication strategy to better engage in dialog with stakeholders, create a sense of community, improve general promotion, and reach a wider audience (Carim & Warwick, 2013; Gomez-Vasquez & Soto-Vélez, 2011; Vernuccio, 2014). Furthermore, scholars have also focused on examining how companies utilize digital communication channels such as social media platforms to increase their visibility and raise awareness of products or services (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Chen et al., 2017; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014).

2.1.3. Digital Corporate Communication Strategies

According to the report “Approaching the Future 2023. Trends in Reputation and Intangible Asset Management”, some of the biggest trends identified by organizations are topics such as sustainability, responsible leadership, as well as reputation, and corporate communication. They should therefore be considered in corporate strategies. Especially the application of sustainability and environmental, social, and governance standards (in short ESG) has emerged as the number one trend in the study. The second notable trend is the management of corporate communications. More than half of the experts surveyed believe that this is an important area of work today, particularly in connection with digitalization and cybersecurity. These two topics pose a number of challenges for building good corporate communication. Over half of the communication experts interviewed therefore recommend a focus on the development of innovative content for social media, and corporate purpose and sustainability. Another interesting result from the survey was that 24% of respondents emphasized the importance of avoiding misinformation and fake news through reliable and transparent information (Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies, 2023). Cornelissen (2004) already summarized well how these challenges can be tackled;

“Communications practitioners and senior managers therefore need to be able to take a critical perspective on corporate communications; that is, they need to be able to recognize and diagnose communication-related management problems and have an understanding of appropriate strategies and courses of action for dealing with these” (p. 10).

In the following subchapters strategies, for addressing these challenges will also be outlined by focusing separately on social media and websites.

2.1.3.1. Social media Strategies

Through virtual platforms, also called social networks and social media, it is possible for internet users to interact with each other, as well as to create and publish their own content (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2015). Thus, social networks can be defined as “online-based platforms that are characterized by communication and networking between users” (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2015, p. 3). However, it is important to clarify that the term social networks should not be used as a synonym for social media. The authors Taddicken and Schmidt (2017) therefore try to distinguish between the two terms and describe social media as “various types of digitally networked communication, including platforms such as Facebook, Wikipedia, the video platform YouTube or weblogs [...and] Twitter ” (p. 4). Social media thus encompasses more than just social networks and serves as a collective term for various digital communication channels and services, thus being considered a more suitable terminology to describe the scope of this research (Taddicken & Schmidt, 2017).

In the last few years, social media has also transformed into a very well-known strategic tool for building corporate communication (Carim & Warwick, 2013; Gomez-Vasquez & Soto-Vélez, 2011). This is partly due to the fact that social media platforms can be used “for collaboration, participation, learning, sharing” (Gomez-Vasquez & Soto-Vélez, 2011, p. 167). The communication between companies and the user can thus be conceived as a “two-way communication process” (Gomez-Vasquez & Soto-Vélez, 2011, p. 167). The research additionally reveals that if a company is using social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, the stakeholders expect from the company that it interacts with the users. Therefore, it is not enough to just play the channels anymore, there must be an effort to engage and exchange ideas and opinions. The researchers then follow up connecting their results with conclusions that the study carried out by Burson-Barsteller (2010) had made previously. For instance, one key insight is that companies should not be avoiding the platforms where the discussions are taking place. By doing this, they could be overlooking the chance of having their voice heard as well. Therefore, the offered interactivity of the different channels is a great advantage for companies that can directly see how a post is received by followers. More recent literature supports this finding and also keeps on highlighting the fact that social media can be used as a kind of tool to facilitate relationship building in an interactive and conversational way (Cortado & Chalmeta, 2016; Moore et al., 2015; Qiao, 2019). The study by Qiao (2019) also points out that although they are time-consuming, especially

conversation-based interactivity has shown positive effects for companies since it promotes greater participation and emotional and social commitment.

In order to reach a broader audience and to communicate in a fast way, social media has become a popular tool to communicate with stakeholders and other publics. As previously mentioned, this is one of the biggest advantages compared to the traditional media (Cornelissen, 2020; Utz et al., 2013). Plus, it was also found that choosing social media is perceived as a sign for “willingness of an organization to quickly inform its stakeholders and to engage in dialog with them” (Utz et al., 2013, p. 45).

However, to communicate a brand effectively through social media is not an easy task and requires well thought-out strategies. To achieve what has been developed in the strategy, it is important that a company has also clear social media tactics so it can use the different opportunities that these social media channels offer to their advantage (Harris Lipschultz, 2020). Tactics are therefore seen more as operational with which the plan is executed such as the actual activities or products of communication. Botan & Hazleton (2006) also states that strategy instead consists around ideas, reasoning, and the art of persuasion.

There are many different forms of social media like Twitter¹, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat and more recently TikTok which offer companies the opportunity both to enter into dialog with their consumers and communicate their brand (Harris Lipschultz, 2020; Vernuccio, 2014).

For instance, the social media platform Facebook was founded in 2004 and has already reached over three billion active users in 2023. In addition, YouTube that is known for video content, follows Facebook as one of the most popular social media channels worldwide with 2.4 billion users. The third most used social network is the messaging app WhatsApp (Dixon, 2023). Its new feature “WhatsApp Business” is hereby becoming especially interesting for companies, since it offers different opportunities for companies to use it as a communication channel to address stakeholders (Jannah, 2023). Additionally, the social media platform Instagram, which is particularly popular with the younger demographic, is currently in fourth place with 2.0 billion active users (Dixon, 2023). This platform is all about visual content, so mainly photos and short videos are shared (Golbeck, 2015). In 2022, the short-form video app TikTok was the most downloaded app internationally and as of October 2023, TikTok

¹ Twitter has had a new name since 2023. It is now called X. However, as this name is not yet established at the time of this thesis and to avoid confusion, the name Twitter will continue to be used.

already has over 1 billion globally users (Ceci, 2023). When choosing the right social media platform, however, it is not only important for a company to pay attention to its reach. When planning the communication concept, it is therefore important to know on which platform its target group is located, to pay attention to where the competition already is placed (competitor analysis), to define clear goals beforehand and to make sure that the performance of the activities can be measured (Schmidbauer & Knödler-Bunte, 2004).

Furthermore, companies must consider that the type of content differs on the various platforms. However, it can be generalized from the results of various studies that social media posts of companies with a conversational or personal tone are able to lead to more engagement and a more positive stakeholders' opinion towards the company (Sung & Kim, 2014; Vernuccio, 2014; Kelleher, 2009). Moreover, advantageous outcomes such "trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality" (Kelleher, 2009, p. 172) have also been identified in scientific research.

Moreover, the exploratory study carried out by Vernuccio in 2014 identifies four clusters that stands out in terms of different approaches such as interactivity and openness to build corporate brands via social media; (1) Cautious Beginners, (2) Confident Communicators, (3) Selective Strategists and (4) Rising Stars. For this dissertation, especially the cluster "Cautious Beginners" is interesting since it consists mainly of the automotive, financial services, and food sector. What is particularly interesting about this cluster is that it focuses on social networking sites and on communicating the company brand. Moreover, it specifies customers as the main target stakeholder group. This point is developed further in the last chapter of this dissertation.

The study also shows the increasing focus of companies on interactivity "moving from one-way communication to a dialogue" (Vernuccio, 2014, p. 227). Corporate branding strategists are therefore recommended to use more conversational forms of interactivity so that the full spectrum of social media is utilized, and more stakeholders can be included in the dialogue. This could be achieved by everyone contributing to the "creation, distribution, and use of the content" (Vernuccio, 2014, p.228). This recommendation aligns with the trend development in corporate communication described by Cornelissen (2020) which also highlights that conversational forms that encourage interactivity are more likely to be applied. Especially due to the new technological innovations and social media that make this form of communication possible. Moreover, since social media enables organizations to

engage with their stakeholders, it has the power to increase participation and transparency and further build better relationships with them (Avery & Graham, 2013; Bertot et al., 2010; Saxton & Waters, 2014).

One challenge posed by social media, however, is the rapid pace at which information can be exchanged. This makes it much easier to spread of misinformation (Wu et al., 2016). It is therefore important that companies try to keep up with trends and respond to external factors as quickly as possible and as openly as possible. The best way to do this is by employing various strategies such as regularly monitoring the social media channels by using tools, that help tracking company mentions and trends. This will allow a proactive response to possible issues happening or topics to which a company should take a position. In doing so, it is important to ensure that it provides enough information to solve the misunderstanding (Batinca & Treleaven, 2015; Harris Lipschultz, 2020). In his book about Social media Communication, Harris Lipschultz (2020) also mentions how “monitoring conversation buzz” (p. 26) was one of the first social media measurement techniques. It involved tracking the buzz for brands and comparing them with their competition. Nowadays, the measurement is much more detailed as most online activity is open to benchmark data measurement. This makes it possible to better measure the growth and impact of campaigns. However, so that this can be carried out successfully quantitative targets must be set in advance. In addition, qualitative analysis of key conversations can offer valuable insight into successful marketing and sales operations (Harris Lipschultz, 2020). Furthermore, when faced with misinformation online, scholars also recommend simply “combating rumors with facts” (Wu et al., 2016, p. 21), in other words, companies should try to clear up the fake news with the truth.

It is clear that social media has changed the rules of communication on the internet and that companies need to adapt accordingly. To ensure that the public dialog between companies and internet users continues to take place on an equal footing and remains objective and fair, the Social media specialist group of the German Association for the Digital Economy (BVDW) has published a "Social media Code of Ethics" guide, in which they make six recommendations: (1) respect, (2) objectivity, (3) accessibility, (4) credibility, (5) honesty and (6) justice. German companies should therefore respect the opinions of their users, deal with criticism objectively, respond to questions as quickly as possible, make transparent and credible statements, deal openly with mistakes, and not cover them up, and

comply with copyright, data and personal rights. Although this Social media Code of Ethics sounds quite simple, it is only fully implemented in a few large companies in German-speaking countries. In the future, it would be therefore recommendable for the top management to adopt these rules (Baller & Schaller, 2017).

2.1.3.2. Corporate Website Strategies

As mentioned in previous chapters, stakeholders expect transparency and insights into company-relevant aspects. In addition to social media, most companies also use corporate websites in particular to communicate their brand and corporate strategy to achieve this and build competitive advantage (Köhler & Zerfass, 2019). They are therefore part “of the online corporate communications strategy, and complete the mix of digital media” (García et al., 2017, p. 141). For this dissertation it is therefore important to explore what strategies are used for corporate websites.

It is generally the case that both user-friendliness (also called usability) and the content are important components of a website (García et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2010). In addition, the perceived corporate culture is also an important factor for website favorability (Ageeva et al., 2019). Companies will therefore disclose on their corporate websites what their mission, vision and purpose is (Ingenhoff & Fuhrer, 2010; Köhler & Zerfass, 2019). As the researchers Köhler and Zerfass (2019) also point out in their study, the automotive company Volkswagen, for example, does this very well. The research points out that VW not only maintains a comprehensive strategy website, but also provides detailed information about its overall vision and mission, as well as its other strategies. Moreover, compared to other multinational companies, German companies in general seem to do well in this aspect, which is also interpreted by researchers as them meeting the transparency requirements of stakeholders better (Köhler & Zerfass, 2019). Transparency is precisely the focus of this research, and the concept will be explored in depth in the next chapter.

Looking at the strategic approach of corporate websites, it becomes clear that most of them decide to have an “About us” section (García et al., 2017). Scholars argue this is mostly due on the one hand to the fact that companies feel the need to present their corporate identity, which then can lead to credibility and therefore demonstrates a commitment to being transparent (Dou & Krishnamurthy, 2007; Pollach, 2005).

Most company websites do not present their strategic content exclusively in written form. Instead, this information is conveyed in a way that is easy to read and through the

integration of media. Of all possible design tools, photos are still the most used features which, in combination with infographics or videos, have the power to increase the attention and interest of stakeholders in the company and its strategy (Köhler & Zerfass, 2019).

The latest trend that companies are using these days is to communicate about their “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR). By doing this, they are not only trying to gain a competitive advantage but if communicated with a high level of transparency it is also able to show that the motives behind a company’s action is sincere (Liu et al., 2023). According to Carroll (2008) CSR can be defined as follows “the commitments of business firms to seek those strategies, to settle on those decisions, or to pursue those lines of activity that are according to societal values and expectations” (p.6).

Nowadays, it is indispensable for companies to speak out about sustainability values and how they intend to comply with them. Paying attention to the topic of sustainability is no longer just a choice that companies have, but a strategic necessity since it has already been established by several studies that it is important for people to know what companies have set as their goal to protect the environment (Kaley, 2019). Further, CSR reporting has been mandatory in Germany since 2017 for companies with more than 500 employees or sales of more than 40 million euros in accordance with detailed guidelines. For example, these companies must report on environmental, social and employee matters in their report. Other topics that must be included are how human rights are respected, how corruption and bribery are tackled and the company's position on diversity and composition (*CSR-Berichtspflicht*, n.d.).

These topics, however, are very complex and many companies are still in need for guidance to learn how to rightfully communicate this information to their stakeholders, especially considering how quickly a company can be accused of practicing greenwashing² or, on the contrary, be confronted with the accusation of greenhushing³ (Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies, 2023). The “Approaching the Future 2023” report furthermore also highlights that “sustainability communication must be: (1) strategic and cross-cutting; 2) transparent and coherent; 3)

² Definition of greenwashing: the “selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance, while withholding negative information on these dimensions” (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011, p. 5).

³ Definition of greenhushing: “the deliberate withholding, from customers and stakeholders, of information about the sustainability practices that they employ” (Font et al., 2017, p. 1007).

created with a 360° vision, focusing on both internal and external aspects; 4) clear and informative; and 5) multiplying and able to generate alliances” (p. 34).

However, not only the environment should be communicated as a priority. Ensuring that there is a category explaining how the company takes care of people and gives back to its society and community (Kaley, 2019). Reilly & Hynan (2014) have also identified a few guidelines for communicating sustainability on social media and on corporate websites: (1) “Benchmark the industry” (p. 755), by analyzing the reports of competitors, (2) “Report concrete outcomes, not vague buzzwords” (p. 755) by using clear and comprehensive details, (3) “Avoid greenwashing” (p. 756) by for example not promoting procedures that are already mandatory as extraordinary deeds, (4) “Be aware of reputational risk” and how quickly company mistakes can be spread online (p. 756), (5) “Consider internal stakeholders in the sustainability message” especially employees by also focusing on an effective internal communications strategy (p. 757), (6) “Use social media best practices” to spread a consistent sustainability message across all platforms (p. 757) and (7) “Stay current with corporate communication shifts”, which in other words means to try to know the latest trends and avert them (p. 757).

According to (Cornelissen, 2020) there are also three different communication strategies called informational strategy, persuasive strategy and dialogue strategy that can be applied to both social media and websites. In the following subchapter, these strategies are described in more detail within the framework of the stakeholder approach.

2.1.4. Digital Corporate Communication frameworks

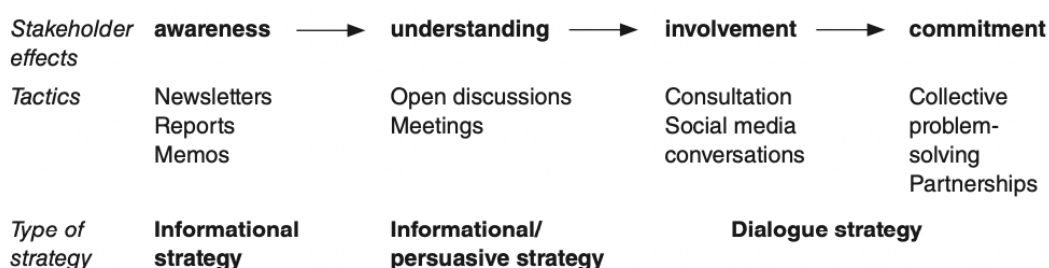
The importance of stakeholders was mentioned repeatedly in the last chapter. For this reason, in this chapter we will look at the stakeholder model, which is a well-known framework in the communications industry. In the current digital age, the communication between companies and stakeholders must try to keep up with the ever-changing digital landscape. Still, there is not a lot of research about methods and measurements of the stakeholder relationships online (Lock, 2019).

However, Cornelissen (2020) describes in Figure 1 different strategies to raise awareness, understanding, involvement and commitment among stakeholders which according to its model description, can also be used for digital corporate communication. *Information strategy* is the strategy used to inform stakeholders about something. This can be done via press releases, newsletters or even reports on a company website. The aim of the

strategy is to clarify the understanding of certain company decisions. The second strategy is known as the *persuasive strategy*. When using this strategy, companies try to have open conversations or arrange meetings with stakeholders to influence or change their attitudes and behavior positively towards the company. Both “corporate advertising and educational campaigns” (p. 73) are used to create a good corporate image. The *dialog strategy* is the third strategy in which companies enter into a mutual exchange with their stakeholders, where they share ideas and opinions with each other. This strategy often also involves asking stakeholders for their opinion and sometimes even the involvement of key stakeholders in the organization's process of making decisions. It is all about “working towards a process of mutual understanding and mutual decision rather than the strategic self-interest” (p.73) of the organization.

However, as Figure 1 illustrates, there is a divergence in this strategy between the way that engages stakeholders by seeking their opinion through, for example, social media conversations. And an approach that engages stakeholders to gain their ongoing commitment through, for example, a joint partnership. An organization's strategy of partnerships with the main stakeholders, such as customers or suppliers, is seen as being one of the strongest forms of communication and at the same time reflects situations in which both sides have common interests and are highly committed to each other. The application of these strategies depends on the importance and the interests of the respective stakeholder groups. Further, the author explains that it also plays an important role to focus on proactive involvement when cultivating lasting stakeholder relationships and offering them opportunities. Which of these strategies is applied depends on how strongly stakeholders are already involved with the company.

Figure 1: *Stakeholder communication: from awareness to commitment*



Source: Cornelissen (2020, p. 73).

“The Global PR and Communications Model 2021” (Figure 2) can also serve as a strategic framework for corporate communications to build both a company's purpose and culture, as well as create differentiation, trust and social legitimacy. A closer look at the model reveals that it is organized into five blocks that show how to protect both the economic and social value of a company and improve the process of corporate decision-making. Another goal is to build real and authentic relationships with stakeholders.

The first block, for example, emphasizes the company's purpose, while highlighting how it can be activated and ensured, so that the way in which the company communicates is also consistent with the defined corporate identity. In general, the company's purpose helps to make decisions in relation to all types of business objectives and manage intangible resources related to the business. The second block, in turn, explains how the brand and corporate culture should be viewed and how a comprehensive brand management and internal alignment are important. It is therefore essential that communication strategies are also aligned with the purpose and values of the company. This is attempted by using a strategic approach when addressing stakeholders, where the corporate values are implemented rather than just promoted. As noted, the clearer the purpose is defined, the more consistent and coherent the communication with the company's stakeholders can be. Block three of the model focusses on reputation management. The significance of a good reputation is emphasized by explaining its power in increasing competitive advantage and reducing uncertainty. When questioned about factors that could positively influence the company's reputation, the communication experts in the survey stated that the products and services as well as sustainability/CSR and innovation play a major role. Another crucial point to consider is the monitoring of reputation; the report on "The Global PR & Communication Model 2021" lists the following four: "Media tracking, Stakeholder dialogue platforms, Tracking of markets and social trends (industry trends & socio-political developments), Incident tracking (complaints & blogs)" (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management & Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership, 2021, p.30). The fourth phase relates to the way companies use communication, so it matches the corporate strategy. It highlights the importance of “coherent and consistent messages” (p.13) when using different communication channels. Which is precisely important to consider when planning an effective digital corporate communication strategy. Lastly, the fifth and last block, is about building a system that provides the entire organization with

intelligence capabilities. These may include a performance measurement system for key performance indicators or the analysis of current and future trends.

The importance for identifying relevant trends at an early stage that may interest stakeholders, becomes especially apparent as it may serve as a foundation for the decision-making process in the field of digital corporate communications.

Figure 2: *Global PR & Communication Model 2021*



The Global PR & Communication Model®

Source: Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management & Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership (2021, p.12).

Both models emphasize the importance of stakeholder engagement and the alignment of communication with organizational values. The Global PR & Communication Model 2021 however, provides a more holistic framework by incorporating various aspects such as corporate purpose, culture, reputation management and intelligence capabilities. It therefore offers a broader framework that includes organizational aspects as well as communication. The stakeholder model on the other hand offers a more detailed approach by introducing three communication strategies so companies are able to use it as a guide, in particular to

increase their stakeholder involvement. Both models have their strengths, and their application will always depend on the specific context and the goals of a company. However, these two models could also be used in a complementary way, as applying elements from both models could create a more comprehensive and effective approach when planning digital corporate communications.

2.2. Transparency

2.2.1. Definition of Transparency

When looking up the word "transparency" in the dictionary, one finds various definitions. While the online Cambridge Dictionary describes it as "the characteristic of being easy to see through" (Cambridge University Press, 2021, para. 1), the online Collins English Dictionary (n.d.) defines it as the "quality of being easily understood or recognized, for example, because there are no secrets connected with it, or because it is expressed in a clear way" (para.2).

Moving on to academia, while exploring the present body of literature, it becomes clear that, in recent years, transparency has been defined in many ways and that, depending on the approach, the focus of the term is therefore emphasized in various manners.

Thus, according to Fombrun and Rindova (2000), overall transparency is defined as "a state in which the internal identity of the firm reflects positively the expectations of key stakeholders and the belief of these stakeholders about the firm reflect accurately the internally held identity" (p. 94). This definition emphasizes the reciprocal relationship and alignment between a company's internal identity and the expectations of key stakeholders. However, it can also be considered vague, as it does not include specific criteria.

Ball (2009) examined transparency from a postmodern approach, and while stating that transparency can have many meanings, she identifies three metaphors that characterize its definition. First, she sees transparency as a public value adopted by society to counteract corruption. Second, the researcher describes transparency as synonymous of openly making decisions by governments and non-profit organizations. Thirdly, transparency is seen as a complex instrument of good governance in programs, policies, organizations, and nations. Then transparency is linked in the first metaphor with accountability. The second metaphor emphasizes the promotion of openness while addressing concerns about secrecy and privacy, and the third metaphor shows that policymakers create transparency in the context of

accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness. The analysis concludes that these meanings influence the daily activities of organizational members, as well as means of evaluating programs and policies. In addition, it is highlighted that transparency often becomes an informal mandate from the public and is often required by law.

Furthermore, the study of Taiminen et al. (2015) emphasizes that the two aspects that define transparency the most are “truthfulness and visibility of the information” (p. 741). Transparency is therefore perceived as also taking responsibility for one’s decisions and being honest in the messages the organizations communicate. This also includes the fact that feedback should therefore not only be given but also listened to (Taiminen et al., 2015).

As Ball (2009) also mentioned in her research on what transparency actually is, the more academics have become aware of the importance of transparency, the more they have reinterpreted the term as “a means to encourage open decision-making and public disclosure, to increase accountability, and as a value to incorporate in policies and by which to evaluate policies” (p. 297). However, as Rawlins (2009) points out, providing information cannot be equated with being transparent, rather, this exact process is seen as disclosure.

While analyzing the term "corporate transparency", the authors Vaccaro and Madsen (2009) also summarize that it is “a volatile and imprecise term, often defined incompletely as ‘information disclosure’ accomplished through standardized reporting” (p. 113). The researchers therefore emphasize the importance of the right to know for consumers and other stakeholders, especially concerning the direct impact of corporate strategies on the quality of life. Thus, they point out that dynamic transparency, as opposed to static transparency, is more desirable and effective. Static transparency therefore refers to the fact that companies only disclose information unilaterally and often in response to government regulations. Dynamic transparency, on the other hand, implements social responsibility and aims to promote engagement and dialog with stakeholders.

Further studies confirm this and even expand this latter understanding of transparency by stating that when entering the dialogue, people perceive organizations as more transparent and credible when they are presented with messages that have not only disclosure but also clarity and accuracy, compared to less transparent messages (Holland et al., 2018).

Christensen and Cornelissen (2015) have also determined that transparency in the organizational context means considering the type of information provided by the organization and that it is also important to define how the public perceives this information.

On the other hand, Rawlins's (2009) study, for example, addresses organizational transparency in greater detail as a “parsimonious set of reputation traits (integrity, respect, and openness) and communication efforts (participation, substantial information, accountability, and secrecy)” (p. 94-95). He also concludes that in order to build the trust of stakeholders, three important elements are needed: “information that is truthful, substantial, and useful; participation of stakeholders in identifying the information they need; and objective, balanced reporting of an organization’s activities and policies that holds the organization accountable” (Rawlins, 2009, p. 74). In this dissertation, this definition of organizational transparency will move into the center of attention, since it encompasses transparency practices in a broader organizational context, considering internal and external dynamics (Kundeliene & Leitoniene, 2015).

Furthermore, when talking about transparency in general, it is also important to explain the term accountability, so it is not used synonymously. This is a mistake that has already happened frequently in the past (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015). While these concepts are related to each other, it is still important to differentiate them clearly, since they do not mean the same (Ball, 2009; Fox, 2007). The researchers McGrath and Whitty (2018), for instance, define the term accountability as being the “liability for ensuring a task is satisfactorily done” (p. 702). Since transparency is able to create accountability, it can be seen as the foundation for it (Ball, 2009; Fox, 2007). Furthermore, both are important when it comes to shaping corporate reputation and building trust (Borden & Zhang, 2023; Fombrun, 2004; Jahansoozi, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2018; Rawlins, 2008). However, although these are related concepts, they also focus on different aspects of organizational behavior in the context of corporate communication. Transparency is about making information accessible and thereby scaffold companies in becoming reliable sources of information for both professional journalists, as well as citizens (Molina Rodríguez-Navas et al., 2021). On the contrary, accountability is about taking responsibility for ensuring that a task is completed satisfactorily (McGrath & Whitty, 2018).

Another term which is often mentioned in connection with transparency and should be defined so that it can be better distinguished from transparency is authenticity. The authors Shen & Kim (2012) define it as “the extent to which one acts in accord with the true self” (p.375). They also claim that transparency can serve as a basis to characterize perceived authentic organizational behavior. The study by Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) also found

that both the perceived transparency of the company and its authenticity have a positive influence on corporate reputation. Furthermore, they also found that when a company comes across as being authentic the public is more interested in communication their own views as well as to engage and contributing affectively. These results also underline why it is important for companies to act transparently, since without transparency, there also will be probably a lack of authenticity and accountability.

2.2.2. The role of transparency in digital corporate communication

With the continued steady increasing popularity of digital technologies, and thus also the digitalization of communication, not only the availability of information has improved. The expectation towards companies that they must share relevant information transparently has also increased (Delgado, 2019; Faria, 2023; Thøger Christensen, 2002). It is particularly interesting to contemplate about this since there was a time when companies were able to decide for themselves what they communicated to the public, without there being any specific rules requiring transparency (Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003).

However, nowadays, companies operating in the European Union (EU) are expected to publish various extensive reports disclosing information about their activities, and thus ensure transparency. EU law therefore requires companies to disclose corporate financial information as well as bring out corporate sustainability reports, in which they provide information on social and environmental issues (European Commission, n.d.-a). New rules on corporate sustainability reporting implemented at the beginning of 2023 also try to ensure that stakeholders have access to all the social and environmental information they need to make decisions with a thorough understanding. This is assured, for example, by making the reports available on the corporate websites without any costs (European Commission, n.d.-b). The rules published in the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive are thus trying to become more modern and embrace the digitalization of reporting (EUR-Lex & Legal Information Unit, 2022).

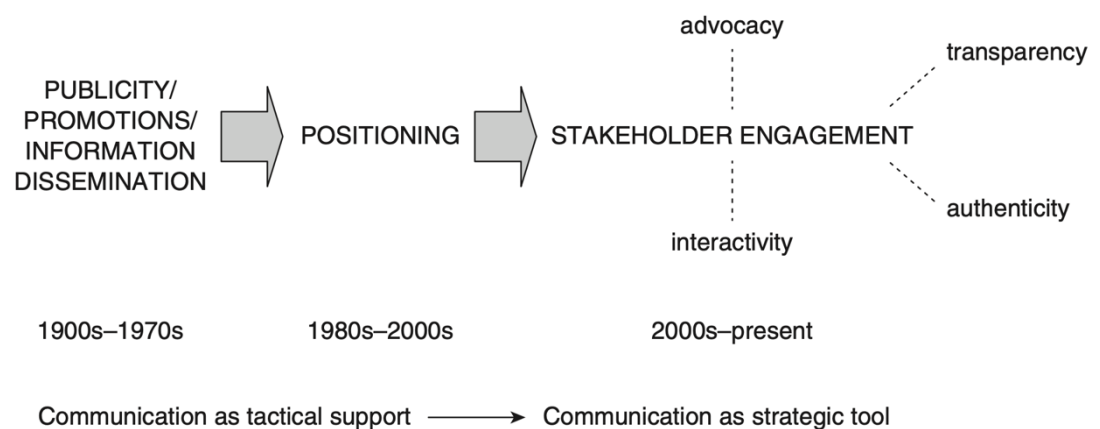
In addition, in 2018, a group of human rights organizations, lawyers, and academic experts in the United States of America (USA) developed a set of principles to help ensure that companies are as transparent and accountable as possible on their internet platforms, especially regarding the moderation of user-generated content. Several large companies, including Apple, Facebook (Meta), and Google, have subsequently communicated that they will adhere to these principles. Since 2018, the Santa Clara Principles have been revised and

a new version has been created, that provides a more detailed explanation of the specific information that is required to ensure on one hand meaningful transparency and other hand accountability (*Santa Clara Principles on Transparency and Accountability in Content Moderation*, n.d.).

Further, similar to the companies ranked with a high reputation, those perceived as having a good CSR report, among other things, score points by “reporting is an honest, transparent and full-scale self-assessment instead of a polishing of performance data” (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 266).

Figure 3 shows that the priorities regarding corporate communication have changed constantly over the last 100 years. From this point of view, the way in which companies communicate with their stakeholders has constantly develop. Thus, communication is no longer predominantly used tactically, but much more as a strategic tool, aimed at achieving organizational objectives and building reputation among stakeholders. Moreover, the focus has evolved from "publicity" to "positions", and from this to “stakeholder engagement” since the beginning of 2000. Here it is particularly evident that, in addition to advocacy and interactivity, authenticity and transparency are now also being considered. This change has been strengthened, above all, by digital media, and thus also by more interactive and dialog-oriented communication options (Cornelissen, 2020). In terms of transparency, further research has also demonstrated that this kind of engagement and participation is what allows transparency in the first place (Holland et al., 2018; Rawlins, 2009).

Figure 3: *Trends and developments in corporate communication*



Source: Cornelissen (2020, p. 12).

Furthermore, care should be taken to ensure that corporate social media communication is also transparent. This is partly due to the fact that transparency can increase interaction and improve credibility (Adeline et al., 2012; Matei et al., 2015).

Moreover, the authors Fombrun and Foss (2001) even identify transparency as one of the five principles of building a strong reputation. They refer to various findings of the Reputation Institute that make it clear that companies that are more visible, disclose company information, and engage with stakeholders, perform better in reputation ranking. Building a good reputation is important because it influences customers loyalty, potential top job candidates and helps to prevail against the competition. When taking a look at the online landscape, transparent communication on social media can also help companies manage their reputation and is therefore becoming more and more important, so that lasting relationships can be built between companies and their stakeholders (DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Eck, 2012). It is therefore important to regularly deliver relevant content to all groups on social media and to engage in an honest dialogue. Only when this happens a company's online reputation can be nurtured.

Furthermore, Eck (2012) highlights that it is necessary to be transparent in one's actions and regularly share information. He also argues that publishing regular updates on company activities, projects and progress on a blog or on platforms such as Facebook can help create trust with stakeholders by giving them an insight into ongoing developments.

Moreover, the authors DiStaso and Bortree (2012) found that communication professionals find the use of transparency in social media very important, as it allows them to explain to different stakeholders what their company is doing and why. Thus, by providing this information, people are then able to make well-informed decisions. In addition, the analysis of the results showed that social media can also be used as a tool to account for one's own actions.

Hence, the results of the study from Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) show as well that, in addition to face-to-face communication, the potential for interactivity on social media in particular fulfills expectations of transparent communication. However, several studies also highlight that in order to fulfill the demand for transparency, the public expects to be able to engage with companies in a genuine and open way, particularly due to technological advances (Berg & Feldner, 2017; Liu et al., 2023). Berg and Feldner (2017) therefore highlight how important it is to make sure that true transparency is "balanced with quality

information (truth) that is sincerely (sincerity) offered with an eye of what provides for social good (right)” (p. 165).

Further, research has also found out that to be more transparent, corporate blogs, for example, should be honest, open, and truthful, disclose information appropriately, use a personal tone, and make sure that the blogger's personality and the corporate image match (Adeline et al., 2012).

As mentioned before, nowadays, companies are forced by several guidelines to publish reports where they share information. Various social media channels also share online reports where they give insights about actions that they take, to enforce their community guidelines and policies or to ensure that content or accounts that violate their policies are restricted. For instance, TikTok has a transparency report “under the European Union’s Terrorist Content Online Regulation 2021/784” (p. 1), which aims to fight violent extremism on the social media platform. The report therefore shows various steps on how to deal with such content and what the general rules are that users should adhere to (TikTok, n.d, 2023).

In addition, the North American internet company Meta Platforms, that owns and operates, among others, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, also has a transparency center where it regularly publishes reports about “Community Standard Enforcement” on Facebook and Instagram, “Intellectual Property”, “Government Requests for User Data” or “Content Restrictions”, which also highlights the increasing importance of transparency in online communication (Meta, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

In this dissertation, organizational transparency, especially online, has so far mostly been associated to a positive context, by presenting favorable research. However, it is always important not to exclude the downsides, as transparency also brings its own challenges.

Similar to the authors Christensen and Cornelissen (2015) that classify transparency as a myth, the authors Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2016) also have a more critical view towards transparency and introduce the concept of pseudo-transparency. They explain it by saying “that pseudo-transparency can be understood as a set of strategic actions” (p.122) that companies use to just appear transparent. The companies manage this “by creating a sense of transparency, rather than being truly transparent” (p.122) with their various stakeholders. This is occurring more and more frequently due to digital communication technologies, especially the Internet, where information can be shared immediately and often without major financial outlay. Above all, they highlight that applying trust and transparency in the

growing social media industry “has proven to be a slippery slope” (Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2016, p. 125). The scholars therefore suggest that although transparency is often narrowly defined as the disclosure of information, this information may not always be accurate or even truthful.

Besides, Thøger Christensen (2002) emphasizes in his article on "Corporate communication: The challenge of transparency" that simply making information about an organization available does not necessarily lead to a more differentiated picture for the public. Thøger Christensen therefore states that "Transparency, it seems, is in the eye of the beholder" (p. 166). Moreover, the author notes that although information is a prerequisite for having more knowledge and getting more insights, an existing knowledge framework is also needed in advance to better process new information. If this does not exist, it may be that although more information is made available by organizations, this actually tends to create “distrust and increase alienation” (p. 166). He therefore suggests that transparency should not be viewed objectively and equated solely with the availability of information. Instead, transparency should be seen as a social phenomenon that is influenced by corporate actors and the strategies, they develop.

Despite the challenges presented by Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2016) and Thøger Christensen (2002) it is still crucial to recognize the significance of transparency in digital corporate communication, that becomes clear by the presented arguments in favor of the role of transparency in building trust between companies and their stakeholders online. Additionally, it is suggested that when companies are open and truthful about their activities, decisions, and performance, this creates credibility and a good reputation, which in turn often can contribute to long-term success in today's digital age. However, it is also clear from the literature review that transparency is a complex concept and that simply making information available online will not suffice, and instead the goal of being transparent should run through all corporate strategies.

2.2.3. Transparency Models and Strategies

Throughout this chapter, it has become clear how important transparent communication is for multinational companies. Companies worldwide face the challenge of standing out amidst the many different messages in today's digital media landscape. In addition, more and more people are actively looking for inconsistencies in corporate statements and discussing them online (Cornelissen, 2020). At the same time, companies must be careful to maintain a

consistent and authentic image to meet the increasing demands in terms of sustainability, corporate social responsibility and transparency (Cornelissen, 2020; Faria, 2023; Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Zerfaß et al., 2023). To counteract the ever-increasing pressure from stakeholders, certain frameworks can provide a basis for the implementation of transparency in corporate communications.

Wong et al. (2021) note in their research about environmental transparency and accountability that stakeholder governance can strongly influence the level of transparency. Particularly the disclosed information, or the absence of it, is sometimes used by stakeholders to pressure companies into making more disclosures. To handle this pressure better, they therefore identified “four criteria — identifiability, awareness of monitoring, expectations of evaluation, and social pressure” (p. 17), which can be also increased through stakeholder action. By incorporating this criteria companies enhance both the variety and depth of content, as well as the targeting of specific stakeholder groups and communication channels. This entire process ultimately results not only in the improvement of transparency and increased accountability, but also into a transformation of companies towards greater “nature-inspired enterprises and accountability leaders” (Wong et al., 2021, p. 17).

Thus, while applying this framework, the authors choose to analyze environmental programs and initiatives, as well as information in the annual and CSR reports and websites, news reports, NGO audit reports, and media releases, since they consider that those are the most reliable sources.

Most stakeholders expect annual reports to be published, in which companies address and comment on various topics. To ensure that these reports include all important topics in a detailed and transparent way, there are several international initiatives and guidelines that companies can or should follow. The Global Reporting Initiative, for example, is a well-known initiative that helps companies “understand and communicate their sustainability impacts enabled through the world's most widely used standards for sustainability reporting - the GRI Standards” (Global Reporting Initiative, 2023, p. 1). This framework is very extensive and covers many different economic, environmental, and social topics. What sets it especially apart is that it leads to more transparency, since it guides organizations to disclose significant information in an easily accessible way. This in turn enables stakeholders to understand the company's sustainability impacts and progress (Thompson, 2023).

Table 1 shows an overview of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards for sustainability reporting, which are divided into three series of standards: Universal Standards, Industry Standards and Topic Standards. While the universal standards set the groundwork for reporting, the sector standards cater to a more sector-specific reporting. Further, the topic standard can be used for reporting specific information.

Table 1: *GRI Standards*

Category	Standard	Description
Universal Standards	GRI 1	This standard provides requirements and principles for applying the GRI Standards. It therefore sets the foundation.
	GRI 2	It focuses on disclosures about the reporting organization and covers general information about the structure and processes of the organization.
	GRI 3	This standard is essential for identifying and reporting on material topics as there is guidance that shows how the disclosure of the organization's material topics should be presented.
Sector Standards	GRI 11 – GRI 18	Provides organizations with information about their material topics. This enables the organization to use the industry standards applicable to its sectors.
Topic Standard	GRI 201, GRI 403, GRI 305, GRI 415, GRI 303, GRI 202, GRI 304, GRI 205	Contains information that the organization can use to report on its impact concerning specific topics. The topic standards cover a series of different topics. The organization follows the topic standards based on the list defined by GRI 3.

Note. Adapted from the GRI Standards based on the Consolidated Set of the GRI Standards by Global Reporting Initiative (2024).

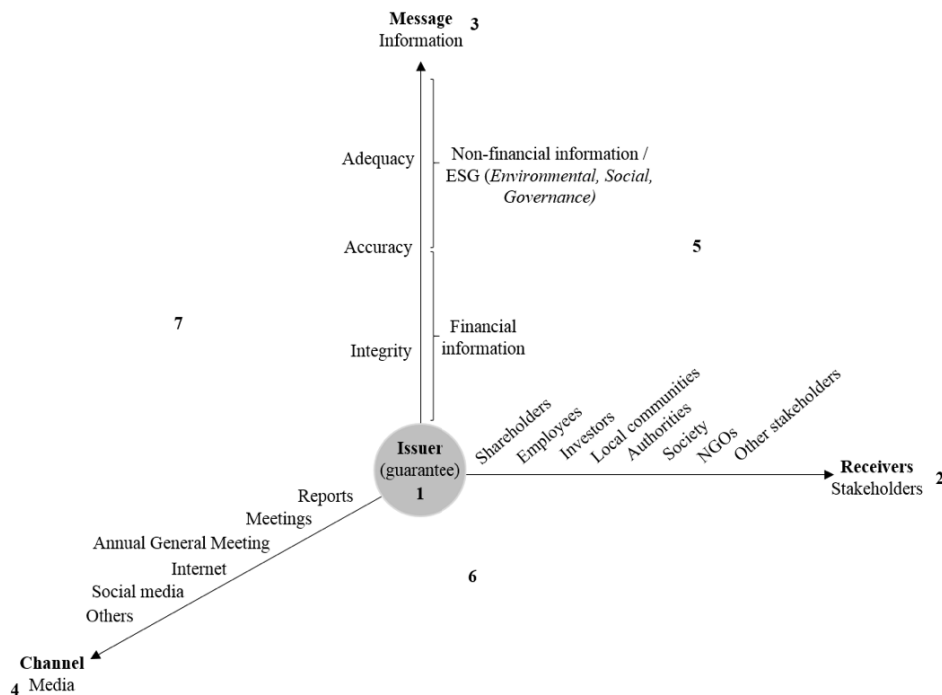
As it becomes clear, transparency is a complex concept that has different ways in which it can be approached, especially with the recurrent emergence of new digital channels (Baraibar-Diez & Odriozola, 2015).

Furthermore, transparency is often expected to be reached with the use of a two-way information flow and conversational forms that foster interactivity (Avery & Graham, 2013; Bertot et al., 2010; Cornelissen, 2020; Saxton & Waters, 2014).

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that of a two-way information flow and conversational forms are not the only solution. Baraibar-Diez and Odriozola (2015) developed a new model of transparency based on well-known and established models and theories in the communications sector such as Lasswell's model of communication (1948), the mathematical model by Shannon and Weaver (1949), the source-message-channel-receiver (SMCR) model from David Berlo (1960) and the theory of communicative action developed by Habermas (1981). Therefore, the elements "issuer", "receiver", "message" and "channel" also were considered that were mostly established in the area of communication sciences by Lasswell's model, which analyzes communication by asking five questions about (1) who?, (2) says what?, (3) in what channel?, (4) to whom? and (5) with what effect?

Furthermore, while building this new model, the authors answered the six Ws "which the novelist Kipling called six honest serving men: what, why, when, how, where and who" (Baraibar-Diez & Odriozola, 2015, p. 4). Finally, based on all these observations and analogous to the "Three-Dimensional Business Definition model" of Abell (1980), which provides a framework for defining business by considering three dimensions or graphically speaking with three axes labeled customer needs, customer groups and technology, a transparency model was created (see Figure 4). In this model, the axes instead show "Message, Receivers, and Channel", which is similar, as this also answers the questions of who exactly is to be addressed, what is to be communicated, and how it is to be communicated to achieve transparency.

Figure 4: *Analogy of the proposed model of transparency with the Abell Model (1980)*



Note. The model shows a newly developed three-dimensional model of transparency with a 7-step path, which can be used as a tool when planning a transparent communication strategy. *Source:* Baraibar-Diez & Odriozola (2015, p. 8).

The following information can be extracted from this model: 1) to achieve transparency, the corporate communication strategy should be based on three elements - receiver, channel, and message; 2) next, is addressing the questions “who” and “to whom”, focusing on the stakeholders; 3) then, answer the questions around “what” and “why” exactly, such as, if the information of the company is complete or adequate; 4) finally, the emphasis is on the “how” and “where”. One of the main questions, therefore, is which communication channels the company uses. The fifth, sixth and seventh steps of the model are all about suitability. Thus, 5) centers around determining if the message for the stakeholders is understood by the right target group; 6) makes sure that the right channel is chosen for “the right group of stakeholders” (p. 9); 7) has as a goal to consider the alignment of “the right channel to the right piece of information” (p. 9).

The authors Holland et al. (2018) also emphasize in their study that cultivation strategies could also support the development of transparency, which many companies are committed to achieve. Above all, they point out that cultivation strategies can help manage relationships with the public, emphasizing the effectiveness of two-way symmetrical strategies in

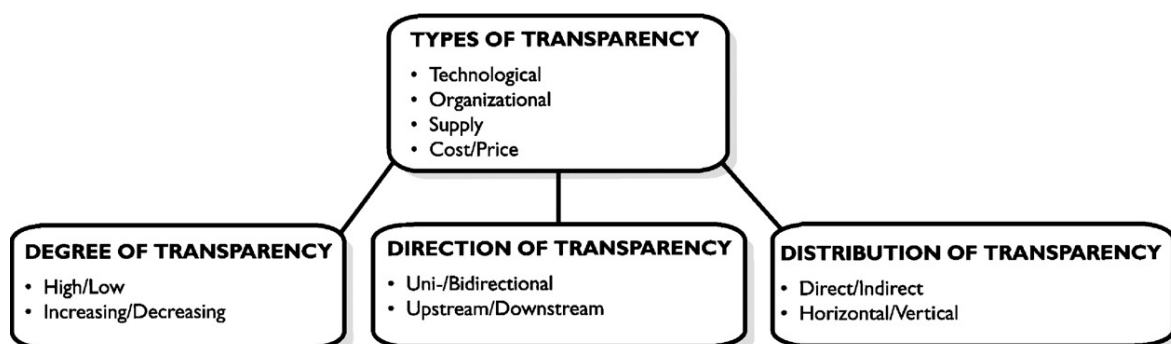
fostering positive outcomes like “trust, commitment, and satisfaction” (p. 262). Furthermore, the authors highlight the connection between transparency and certain cultivation strategies such as accessibility and being open. Further, it is concluded that cultivation strategies “would rely on message tactics exhibiting transparent message design features to be implemented” (p. 262).

Meintjes (2021) also suggests that companies should change to the active application of relationship-cultivation strategies, to ensure transparency, as this can also have a positive impact on the company’s authenticity. This includes making their true identity and behavior clear to stakeholders. In addition, these strategies go beyond the provision of information and require active engagement between the company and stakeholders, so that solutions to problems can be found together.

Building on previous research, the authors Hultman and Axelsson (2007) have outlined four types of transparency and added three related facets from a management marketing point of view. Although this model comes from another scientific field, it can be still considered relevant and applicable to corporate communication since it be used as a guide to find the right balance and improve the effectiveness of transparency initiatives.

The four types are cost transparency, supply transparency, organizational transparency, and technological transparency (see Figure 5). The interesting feature about this model is that it highlights the dynamic aspects of the transparency concept. It therefore also outlines three additional aspects: degree of transparency, direction of transparency, and distribution of transparency.

Figure 5: *Typology of transparency.*



Source: Hultman & Axelsson (2007, p. 629).

In this model, the degree of transparency ranges from completely transparent to non-transparent. When considering the "direction of transparency", it is recognized that the flow of information can be both unidirectional and bidirectional and can also flow in both directions. However, the authors argue that while information can flow in both directions, the sharing of information is not necessarily reciprocal. The third facet, the "distribution of transparency", shifts the focus to how transparency can be direct or indirect. The study also emphasizes that while transparency is often seen as positive, a high level of transparency also has negative effects and companies should be aware of this. It therefore becomes clear that this model can also be valuable for corporate communications, as it emphasizes the need for thoughtful and strategic transparency to avoid unintended consequences.

In summary, when comparing these models to each other, it can be said that Wong et al.'s (2021) research, on the one hand, provides ideas for implementing transparency in corporate communication by identifying four criteria that can be increased through stakeholder action. On the other hand, Baraibar-Diez & Odriozola's (2015) transparency model integrates various established communication models and emphasizes a structured approach that includes elements such as the recipient, the channel, and the message. Further, it emphasizes the need for strategic transparency to avoid unintended consequences. However, the complexity of the model may make it challenging for companies to implement this structure and address all the detailed steps. When compared to the other models, the GRI Standards (2024), on the contrary, provide a structured framework for sustainability reporting by addressing economic, environmental, and social aspects and therefore disclosing relevant information, that stakeholders can access. By following this, companies are able to build a foundation for transparent communication. Nevertheless, it focuses primarily on sustainability reporting. It is therefore the responsibility of the company to also consider other aspects relating to corporate communications.

Although each model offers a unique perspective and can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of transparency in corporate communication, each company must choose what best suits its current situation.

2.2.4. Ethical Concerns

Ethics in general help people distinguish right from wrong, and adjust their behavior accordingly (Tzafestas, 2018). Some general ethical values include being transparent, trustworthy, and fair (Segkouli et al., 2022). However, as the comparative analysis of

transparency reports on online platforms by Urman and Makhortykh (2023) shows, there are major discrepancies between the companies in terms of the data they provide in their reports.

Additionally, in most cases, these reports do not comply with the Santa Clara Principles that were previously described. One of the reasons for this is that companies tend to omit internal moderation practices from their reports. The authors therefore recommend three dimensions for more meaningful transparency: firstly, the reports should be accessible to all; secondly, harmonization should be ensured by having the same standards for transparency reporting; and thirdly, it should be guaranteed that the reporting is detailed.

Both in the USA and in the EU, companies are obligated to publish reports to adhere to the government's guidelines. The authors Vaccaro and Madson (2009), however, highlight the importance of also communicating information that is not legally required, even if it might have a negative impact on the image of the company. If, for example, a company's activities lead to emissions of toxic pollutants, possible harmful effects on the health of those affected should be still communicated or disclosed upon request (Vaccaro & Madson, 2009; Lundgren & McMakin, 2018).

Furthermore, the possibilities offered by digital technologies make it possible to rethink ethical challenges relating to the transparency of companies. Companies can, therefore, decide for themselves which information they publish on their websites and which they do not, in order to communicate and interact with potential customers and other stakeholders. The authors thus also state that “in theory, new virtual technologies may allow firms to become completely transparent institutions or naked corporations” (Vaccaro & Madsen, 2006, p. 148). This concept aligns with the ideas presented in the book “The Naked Corporation” by Tapscott in 2003. Even before social networks had reached the importance they have today, it was argued that transparency is revolutionizing and forcing companies to rethink their fundamental values.

Further, Vaccaro and Madsen's (2006) study presents a model that integrates the ethical, economical, and financial forces influencing transparency. In their model, five different factors influence transparency: 1) customers; 2) competitors; 3) investors ; 4) privacy; and 5) security. The first factor is represented by the demands of customers for more transparency. The second force consists of competitors, who exert pressure and want every possible piece of information because they want to improve their own market position. Then there are the investors who can withdraw their financial support and generally negatively

influence the share value if they are not satisfied with the company's transparency levels. In the real world, these three factors are not the only factors influencing transparency. Since the real life scenario is more complex, the authors emphasize that the transparency of a company depends not only on financial and economic constraints, but also on ethical issues such as data protection and security. The authors recognize that both internal and external stakeholders are affected by the protection of data privacy and the safeguarding of security, adding these two additional factors as crucial elements to complement the model. Especially in a contemporary digital age, the protection of privacy is an important ethical concern. They also explain, in their case study about a multinational corporation, how this particular company creates transparency by informing customers about current management practices on online platforms or policies on sensitive topics such as child labor exploitation and data protection. In terms of organizational transparency awareness, this case study therefore shows that using online platforms can assist companies in improving their transparency degree.

It can also be noted that “transparency has long been considered a normative goal for organizations” (p.263). As such, they act ethically to demonstrate accountability and build positive relationships with stakeholders by providing them with important information (Holland et al., 2018).

Furthermore, research also concludes that transparency and communicative actions are closely linked, whereby the latter cannot be achieved without the former. However, it is also criticized that the connections between transparency, issues management, and ethics are currently not sufficiently investigated in research. It therefore highlights the growing public expectation for organizations to engage openly and sincerely. They also emphasize the consequences of failing to establish transparency to assess truth – i.e. consistency with facts, accuracy – i.e. having evident facts and expert viewpoints, and sincerity. i.e. being honest (Berg & Feldner, 2017; Cambridge University Press, n.d.; Kocsis, 2021; Vraga & Bode, 2020).

Ultimately, there is the argument that legitimate issues management should be understood as a practice in communicative action that requires companies and Public Relations (PR) professionals to comply to superior standards and be accountable for how they contribute to public understanding of social issues. Lastly, it positions transparency as essential to ethical practice in issue management (Berg & Feldner, 2017).

2.3. German Automotive Industry

2.3.1. *Introducing the German automotive industry*

January 29th in 1886 marked a significant moment in history. The German engineer Carl Benz submitted a patent application for the first motor car in the southern German city called Mannheim. A few months later, he took his family on the first long-distance journey in automotive history, demonstrating the practicality of the automobile to the whole world. (Mercedes-Benz Group AG, n.d.-a). Since then, a lot has changed and today, the German automotive industry is one of the most important and successful industries in the world and plays a central role in the German economy. In 2022 alone, the companies in this sector generated a turnover of 506 billion euros and employed over 774 thousand people. Thereby, the vehicle manufacturers account for over half of the automotive industry's total turnover. On the other hand, automotive suppliers contribute under 20% of the sector's turnover, while manufacturers of bodies and trailers account for just three percent (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, n.d.). Due to these facts, this dissertation focuses particularly on the vehicle manufacturing companies, which make up the majority of the automotive industry.

Furthermore, the reason why the German automotive industry also generally counts as one of the largest employers and economic sectors becomes clear when one takes a closer look at the international figures. For instance, it contributes to the global economic growth by exporting annually over 2.65 million cars from Germany to the entire world (Statista Research Department, 2023).

The recognition of the German car manufacturers is mostly due to the offer of high-quality vehicles and innovative technologies. In addition, German car brands are often associated with precision, high performance, and advanced engineering. In order to maintain these advantages in the future, companies in the German automotive industry plan to continue investing several billion euros in research and development (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, n.d.).

Among the largest German automotive manufacturers are Volkswagen AG, Mercedes-Benz, BMW AG, Audi AG, and Porsche AG. Table 2 shows some important figures on five of the largest German automotive companies, which illustrate their reach and power.

Table 2: *Overview of the 5 biggest German automotive manufacturers*

Name of the company	BMW AG	Volkswagen AG	Audi AG	Mercedes-Benz AG	Dr. Ing. h.c. F. Porsche AG
Group	BMW Group	Volkswagen Group	Volkswagen Group	Mercedes-Benz Group	Volkswagen Group
Headquarters	Munich	Wolfsburg	Ingolstadt	Stuttgart	Stuttgart
Founding year	1916	1937	1909	1926	1931
Employees	90,901	116,100	87,736	153,852	42,140
Revenues (in millions of euros)	107,874	92,413	69,865	133,044*	40,530

Note. Own overview of the five largest German automotive manufacturers (not groups) based on the information communicated on the companies' websites, annual and sustainability reports 2023 and financial-publications 2023 published in 2024. * Since Mercedes-Benz AG consists of the segments Mercedes-Benz Cars the revenues and workforce numbers were added together.

Furthermore, Mercedes Benz AG, with its product portfolio of Mercedes AMG and G Class, is shunted 7th in the ranking of "Best Global Brands 2023" published by the international brand consulting company Interbrand, and BMW is also seen as one of the best brands worldwide at 10th place. Then again, Audi (45th place), Porsche (47th place), and Volkswagen (50th place) are also on this list but have a lower ranking position (Interbrand, 2023). Interbrand has also published a news article on their website where it is emphasized that the brands in the automotive industry are among the fastest rising brands. Overall, for example, the value of automotive brands increased by 9% in 2023, with BMW (10th place) making it into the top ten for the first time. Porsche, while being on place 47, also achieved a very good growth rate, making it one of the fastest growing brands. Further, Greg Silverman, the Global Director of Brand Economics at Interbrand, pointed out that customer connection was particularly boosted by the increase in the criteria scores such as "Affinity, Trust, Presence and Participation" (*Brand Growth Slows Finds Interbrand's Best Global Brands Report 2023*, 2023, para. 22). This ranking is strongly based on factors particularly common in marketing, but the results also suggest that competition in the automotive

industry is intense and that companies need to continuously work on their brand positioning and reputation to succeed in the global economy.

Furthermore, the German automotive industry is currently undergoing a structural change driven by various trends. For instance, like many other sectors, the automotive industry is also facing social expectations to comply with stricter environmental regulations. Alternative driving systems are therefore becoming increasingly important, which is why German automotive companies are focusing more and more on (1) electromobility, (2) autonomous driving, (3) the emergence of new mobility services, and (4) the increasing automation and networking of manufacturing processes. These changes affect all dimensions of the industry, from production to corporate communications, for car manufacturers and other stakeholders (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, n.d.; Rolland & O'Keefe Bazzoni, 2009). Moreover, the study conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung about the future of the German automotive industry also identified four megatrends; "sustainability, urbanization, individualization, and digitalization" (Bormann et al., 2018, p. 5). The study also highlights innovation as a driving force for continued success.

The entire automotive industry has had to evolve considerably in recent years. "Industry 4.0 technologies, like robotics, advanced manufacturing systems, cyber-physical systems, and augmented reality" (p.17578) must be used to drive innovation in the various vehicles. One technology that is currently receiving a lot of attention is blockchain. This not only ensures data security but also increases trackability, accountability, and transparency in the industry (Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames, 2019).

Furthermore, the German automotive industry is currently experiencing fierce competition, which is putting even more pressure on especially individual automotive companies (Darshan, 2018; Pichler et al., 2021). In particular, competition from China and the USA continues to increase. This includes major players like the Chinese firm BYD and US car manufacturer Tesla, that are two of the world's largest producers of electric cars (Krpata, 2021). This also means that trends such as digitalization or higher requirements regarding environmental standards are not the only challenges that the industry currently must tackle. And while Germany still dominates the market for premium cars and remains one of the largest producers of cars in Europe, it is now necessary to think in a completely new way and no longer focus solely on the car to keep pace in the future (Bormann et al., 2018; Vošta & Kocourek, 2017).

A coherent and attainable communication strategy that is aimed at all stakeholders is becoming increasingly indispensable in order to deal with all these challenges and emerging trends (Rolland & O’Keefe Bazzoni, 2009). The authors Rolland and O’Keefe Bazzoni (2009) also concluded that automotive companies increasingly use corporate websites not only for addressing current social expectations of business practices but also for reporting corporate social responsibility activities. This online presence will be discussed further in future chapters.

2.3.2. Stakeholders’ engagement

“We cannot guarantee success in the long term without knowing the expectations of our stakeholders or actively communicating with them” (Volkswagen AG, 2014, para.8). In the complex landscape of the automotive industry, there are different stakeholders with distinct challenges that shape their experiences and activities. As Volkswagen AG (2014) states, it is important for the success of a company to cultivate relationships with the different stakeholder groups by communicating with them and to know exactly what they expect so that these expectations can be met.

However, as Lock (2019) suggested, “the parameters of relationships between organizations and stakeholders have changed fundamentally” (p. 10) with digitalization. In her systematic review, the author also pointed out the difficulty of indicating the beginning and ending of the relationship between stakeholder and organizations, particularly in online environment. This complexity arises from the use of cookie technologies and user-specific metadata, enabling companies to track website visitors both before and after an interaction, often without the visitors' awareness. In contrast to the offline setting, where a relationship began with a communication act such as calling a customer service phone number, which then progressed into a relationship, in the online setting, following a brand on Facebook can be regarded as the inception of a relationship, with actions like unfollowing marking its potential end. Unlike traditional scenarios, the initiation and conclusion of a relationship, exemplified by unfollowing, predominantly rest in the hands of the stakeholder rather than the company. This shift necessitates more awareness. By incorporating insights from various communication sciences’ theories, the author has therefore proposed a definition for the communicative digital relationship between companies and stakeholders which includes exactly that: “Digital communicative organization-stakeholder relationships are interactions constituted through communication between organizations and stakeholders in mediated

digital environments where all communicating parties are aware of the communication act” (Lock, 2019, p. 9). According to the author, this definition also signifies a distinct departure from a marketing-oriented comprehension of relationships, as it emphasizes communication rather than transactions as the central element.

To understand stakeholders’ preferences regarding communication, it is essential to first identify who the stakeholders in the automotive industry are. The authors Fraga-Lamas and Fernandez-Carames (2019) identified generally 14 main stakeholders of the automotive industry. First and foremost, we have the all-important stakeholder group of (1) car owners and buyers/sellers, which above all demand transparency of the vehicle history and should therefore be provided with a lot of information. This is also the main target group of this dissertation. Additionally, there are groups such as (2) fleet management and (3) car-sharing, ridesharing, or ride-hailing passengers, which is also an increasingly large group. Further in the spectrum, we encounter the fourth group of (4) car entrepreneurs and the fifth (5) car dealers and retailers, followed by (6) original equipment manufacturers (OEM)/vehicle manufacturers, (7) insurance companies, (8) independent repair shops, and (9) after-market. Expanding the circle, (10) governments and public organizations, (11) financial institutions, (12) tech companies, (13) scrappage and recycling initiatives, and (14) academia are also part of the stakeholder groups.

Further, the authors Fraga-Lamas and Fernandez-Carames (2019) illustrated the specific challenges that automotive companies face regarding individual groups. For instance, “Lack of transparency regarding the car's history” (p. 7) is mentioned quite frequently, as well as a general lack of trust, which can be projected onto various topics.

A summarized identification of stakeholders was also shown by Ferenc et al. (2017) in which the German automotive company Volkswagen was taken as an example based on its 2014 sustainability report, in which they presented their stakeholder management. The focus here is on four stakeholder groups: "capital market", "partners", "society" and "customers". An insight is that the aim should be not only to understand the expectations of the respective stakeholders through active communication, but also to strengthen the company’s own market position. In the annual report 2022, which was published at the beginning of 2023, the Volkswagen AG presents a more detailed description of its strategic stakeholder management, that can be seen in appendix A. This resembles the stakeholder listing of the automotive industry by Fraga-Lamas and Fernandez-Carames (2019).

It becomes clear that this group acknowledges the influence of various stakeholder groups by focusing especially on customers and employees. The 2022 report also emphasized that the company strives for an open, constructive dialogue that encourages critical discussions in order to shape and implement stakeholder expectations. The Sustainability Council, which is made up of experts, plays an important role in this, and advises on sustainability issues. In addition, the company's structure is designed to ensure alignment with sustainability goals and emphasize transparency and compliance in all areas.

The study by Suck et al. (2023), which aimed to learn more about stakeholder relationships, expectations and concerns, especially in the light of the latest automotive trends, found that an even greater stakeholder alignment is needed. And the study by Bourne (2016) also emphasized the importance of correctly identifying and understanding the characteristics of the various stakeholders, so that not only their needs and expectations are better understood, but also targeted communication strategies can be used to influence their attitudes and behavior, and therefore engage with them with greater effectiveness.

2.3.3. Corporate Identity

The term "corporate identity" (CI) was already briefly defined in a previous chapter and categorized in the context of digital corporate communication. This chapter aims to classify the importance of corporate identity, particularly concerning the automotive industry in general, but also by providing examples from the German automotive industry.

Researchers already discovered the importance of a well-equipped corporate identity back in the early 2000s. According to the analyses of the authors Balmer and Gray (2000), corporate communication plays a pivotal role in building a link between the corporate identity of an organization and the coveted strategic goal of achieving a good reputation for the company. They also concluded that corporate identity and corporate communication should be viewed from a strategic perspective and, if applied correctly, they can certainly give many companies a significant competitive advantage.

Fundamentally speaking, corporate identity can be seen as a strategic concept that is based on the foundations of the corporate philosophy, vision, and long-term goals (Paliderova et al., 2015). In today's world, the automotive industry is facing various challenges, which have a significant impact on the perception of entrepreneurs by stakeholders and the public. To remain successful in such an environment, automotive companies need both flexibility as well as the power of being able to adapt to the always-

changing circumstances and having a good strategy for building their corporate identity (Zorkóciová et al., 2014).

In Zorkóciová et al.'s (2014) research, it is particularly evident that certain automotive companies (including the German automotive group VW) have been particularly successful when using a monolithic identity (VW) or a brand identity (KMC).

However, it must also be emphasized that the effectiveness of corporate identity programs always depend on the overall performance of the company and their impact is often difficult to measure directly. Corporate identity programs are considered long-term investments and contribute to a company's goodwill⁴. The aspects that shape the corporate identity the most are a company's vision, philosophy, mission, goals, strategy, tradition, history, and management style. In large companies, responsibility for the optimal development and implementation of these elements usually lies with top management (Zorkóciová et al., 2014).

As early as 2009, study results showed a significant increase in the use of corporate websites, particularly in the area of corporate communications, both for reporting and communicating corporate social responsibility activities. This is because automotive companies are trying to recognize and respond to changing local, national, and global societal expectations of business practices. They therefore also show the desired corporate identity there, which is aimed at all target groups (Rolland & O'Keefe Bazzoni, 2009).

Studies conducted in 2022 also confirm these statements. For example, the researchers Marinović et al. (2022) determine as well that the importance of websites is growing, when it comes to building and improving the digital corporate identity. The authors also assign a company's online identity the main functions of facilitating communication with stakeholders in the digital world and creating competitive advantages. In order to achieve this, they therefore suggest that the focus should be on the information quality of the content on the websites. Understanding and improving this aspect can assist in creating more effective and attractive corporate websites and thus a good corporate online identity.

⁴ Definition of goodwill: "it is off-balance sheet intangible assets that are inseparable from the company's potential, reflects its distinctive features (the level and condition of the business reputation, corporate culture, management techniques, etc.) and is able to provide it with additional profit" (Makashova, 2015, p. 62).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is also an important component in shaping corporate identity. Given the widespread discussions around sustainability, which is a core element of CSR, integrating sustainability across all company operations is becoming increasingly important, particularly in sectors like the automotive industry, in which the expectation towards their commitment to reduce the environmental footprint continues to rise due to the previous scandals such as the VW emissions scandal. Therefore, it is fundamental to consider that a corporate identity is reinforced if the company's behavior is coherent and that corporate communication strategies also have the power to strengthen the corporate identity. If all three concepts are thus coordinated, they can strengthen each other (Paliderova et al., 2015; Paurova & Chlebikova, 2020; Wellbrock et al., 2020).

When talking about corporate identity, one should also address the visual aspect of it. For example, brand design including logotypes, color schemes, and typography, these elements are all a visual part of corporate identity. In 2020, BMW, for example, introduced its new brand design for online and offline communications and has thus created a completely new visual dimension of their corporate identity. According to the company's press release, the BMW brand is now more aligned with expectations, especially from customers and thanks to a future-proof appearance, should also fit better into the digital age while showing openness and clarity (BMW Group, 2020).

It seems that the automotive industry is gradually establishing a trend of "less is more". The author Neske, who has been working intensively with digital corporate identity for years, sees the minimalist trend, above all, in the design of car manufacturer logos. She sees the reason for this in the fact that car manufacturers are in the process of creating a corporate identity that also works in the digital world. Her argument is that redesigning the corporate logotype as a flat design (which has been done in recent years for example by VW, BMW and Audi), is more adaptable to a wide variety of online platforms, as they offer a more organized and clearer visual experience. The author also points to the clear transformation that the entire automotive industry is currently undergoing. In order for the companies to be perceived as digital pioneers and visionaries, the author therefore reinforces the need for new digital images to be introduced (Neske, 2021).

2.3.4. Channels of digital corporate communication

The shift from traditional media to digital communication channels, where companies can address their stakeholders directly, is growing, and this trend is also becoming more popular in the German automotive industry. Research showed that, with the advent of new digital media, the automotive industry has seen a shift from the use of traditional communication channels to the use of corporate websites, blogs, social networks, apps, and other digital channels to engage directly with its stakeholders (Hofstätter et al., 2020; Infosys Limited, 2018; Svobodová et al., 2019).

This occurs because amid all the negative reporting that automotive companies are constantly faced with (such as not keeping social and environmental requirements), it allows the companies to take the narrative back into their own hands. BMW, for example, has consequently chosen to convert its editorial hub into the BMW Group Media House and to better clarify the position of the BMW Group on this platform. In addition to self-formulated text formats, visual content is also distributed there. They define the target group as the general public, who primarily spends time online and the focus is on topics such as sustainability, innovation, and design (Thoms, 2020). Stakeholders can thus very easily and quickly find information, not only about the automotive company itself and their position regarding transparency, CSR and sustainability, but also about its products and all the advantages they bring.

Prior to the proliferation of social media, companies primarily relied on traditional channels such as TV and radio, events, celebrity endorsements, and community engagement to generate revenue, increase brand visibility, and engage with their stakeholders. Nowadays, the use of social media is much more popular, and the automotive industry has also made a remarkable shift in this direction. Generally, social media has become an important part of the communication strategies of automotive companies. They not only provide a wide reach, but they also increase engagement with stakeholders, especially customers, in an increasingly connected world. In addition, they have become indispensable for automotive companies not to lose their competitive edge against the constantly evolving automotive industry (Pavlicek, 2023; Sánchez-Iglesias et al., 2023). The authors Sánchez-Iglesias et al. (2023) therefore also concluded that automotive companies profit from sharing not only their brand personality but also informational details about social initiatives on social media.

What becomes apparent when one looks at the online presence of the various automotive companies is that a variety of social media activities is used. In an interview, Hans-Peter Trojek (former Head of Digitalization and Electronic Media and Communication of Volkswagen) revealed to the magazine *Auto.de* that the different social media channels are used for a wide variety of purposes such as distribution or promotion or aiming at different target groups. Therefore, different strategies are used to achieve diversified and specific goals set for each one. For example, he explains that on Facebook, Volkswagen uses an interaction strategy to cultivate the dialogue with interested parties. In addition, while they want to be globally active, they also ensure that their social media profiles are market-specific. This means that most countries have their own Instagram accounts, which are controlled by the market itself in their own language. Hans-Peter Trojek gives the example of his Northern-American communications colleagues, who have set up a Twitter account (Volkswagen USA News) to directly reach professional communicators such as journalists and bloggers with information about the company and its products. He emphasizes the importance of always using content and platforms according to the relevant topic, the respective target group, and, as described, the cultural needs (Niepraschk, 2013).

Besides, a study conducted by Dahiya and Gayatri (2018) highlighted the importance of digital marketing communication when buying a car. While the results cannot be internationally generalized, as the study was carried out with a focus on the Indian automotive market, it is still evident that digital platforms have a major influence on the customer decision-making process and should therefore also be taken into account when planning the corporate communications strategy. Alongside social networks, Dahiya and Gayatri's study found out that the company's website was the most frequently used digital communication channel when buying a car.

Furthermore, the study by Darshan (2018) shows how strong the influence of social media is on the purchasing decisions of customers who are planning to buy a car. In addition, the study also highlights that socio-demographic factors such as age are inversely correlated with the influence of social media, whereby the younger target group tends to be more likely to be influenced by social media. The researcher therefore summarized that it is very important for the automotive industry to develop and implement suitable social media strategies.

Going back to the topic of corporate identity, the content analysis of luxury car brands' social media practices conducted by Ulas and Vural (2019) reveals that automotive companies share their corporate identity primarily on their official Facebook accounts. However, the "Mission" and "Vision" sections are relatively limited in content on this platform. On the other hand, on Instagram, companies actively share content related to their achievements, special day celebrations, technical aspects of products, company-level activities, and customer-oriented events. Further, the study states that companies are also placing increased focus on social media in general when promoting new products and arousing interest in present technological advances, and also use this outlet for advertising campaigns. Moreover, they conclude that social media is used for offering activities to reach and engage consumers in innovative ways and not only for marketing purposes, but also for organizing activities such as corporate social responsibility initiatives and other company-level activities.

Although Instagram is very popular and offers many engagement opportunities, automotive companies currently still prefer Facebook as their main social media channel. The conducted report by Unmetric (2019) also notes that there is a trend towards the consolidation of social media profiles. Rather than having separate social media profiles for each vehicle car model, companies are integrating the separate pages back into the company's main site. This consolidation trend is also reflected in a decline in the number of Facebook pages maintained by automotive companies in the US (including Volkswagen USA) in recent years (Unmetric, 2019).

Tafesse and Wien (2017) propose in their study a comprehensive framework for the planning of social media posts. They also take the automotive industry into account in their analysis, where they found out that the strategy of publishing expert reviews of product features and benefits, also called functional brand posts, is well received. This variant of reporting scores points due to its greater credibility. The authors give as an example the article of the USA newspaper "The Washington Post" which was shared by Mercedes Benz and contains a detailed report "of the GLA 45 AMG, detailing its design elements, features, performance, price, and even the typical buyer profile of the car" (p. 12). Furthermore, their results highlight that brand resonance posts are also used frequently. These are posts that draw attention to the brand's promise and identity. Companies therefore use visual identity elements such as logotypes and slogans, or eye-catching photos, aiming to highlight their

products. In doing so, they try to avoid complex additional information within longer texts. Examples of this include the minimalist car photo posts from BMW, in which they only show the car up close and add a short caption.

This approach is also a general trend in corporate communication, as companies mix different media formats and communication tools when developing their communication channels. By implementing this, it is possible to create a "more effective management of the information environment inside and around the company" (Oltarzhevskiy, 2019, p. 620). In general, the author emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive and balanced use of traditional and new communication channels as mentioned before, as well as access to a wide range of audiovisual, text, and multimedia tools to improve the impact of communication on target groups (Oltarzhevskiy, 2019).

In addition, more and more automotive companies also are using celebrities and influencers to strengthen their brand personality and brand perception (Tafesse & Wien, 2017). A fairly recent example, which also shows the use of new digital technology, is the social media 2023 campaign featuring the Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) social media influencer Lil Miquela, including various posts with her on Instagram and a video on YouTube showing introducing the new BMW iX2 (BMW, 2023-a; BMW, 2023-b). The results of Studen and Tiberius' study (2020) also make it clear that this way of accessing virtual reality and using this leads to improved interaction on digital platforms. Further, the focus is as well, increasingly, on celebrating brand heritage by highlighting historical contributions and achievements and therefore showing more of the company in general (Tafesse & Wien, 2017). As the author Borchers (2023) makes clear, strategic influencer communication is increasingly a useful extension of corporate communication and helps to use influencers to their advantage, especially since it is becoming increasingly important to change traditional ways of thinking into the existing digital field.

However, further research about the German automotive industry also shows that channel multiplexity is still the suggested way of communicating. In other words, both the intertwined use of online and offline channels is beneficial for the German manufacturers. Therefore, while online platforms tend to be used to facilitate knowledge sharing and promote innovation, especially between competitors, they are still dependent on offline interactions, which, on the other hand, should continue to be used in a complementary way.

By doing this, cognitive flexibility and thus the building of trust can be made easier, which is of great importance for companies (Aalbers & Whelan, 2021).

2.3.5. Challenges and Opportunities

For several years now, the automotive industry has been confronted with a wide variety of challenges and emerging trends. As Brünglinghaus (2013) correctly puts it, “changing and heterogeneous customer requirements, stricter regulations and guidelines as well as technological change drivers” (p. 1) is putting the industry under enormous pressure. Companies are increasingly being asked to be more open and accountable and to make their processes and their communication more transparent, as well as maintaining a successful reputation, especially online. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity to develop corporate strategies and foster the growth of the company (Eck, 2012).

Some of the best-known trends in the automotive industry include electric, connected, and autonomous vehicles (Parekh et al., 2022; Sperling, 2018). Vehicle electrification has been reshaping the automotive world for already over 30 years now, however, the real breakthrough did not take place until 2008 with the launch of Tesla’s⁵ electric sports car. Then, nine years later, almost all major car manufacturers were already investing in EVs (Sperling, 2018).

These solutions, which have more sustainable mobility as their ultimate goal, have triggered a desire among stakeholders to see them being implemented by the automotive industry more and more. Thereby, it is important to communicate regularly with stakeholders, since a lack of regular exchange can aggravate the existing challenges to market success (Suck et al., 2022).

As if electromobility and automatization in the automotive industry were not challenging enough, the COVID-19 crisis has also had an impact on the industry. In Germany, for example, over 90 percent of automotive companies were forced to put their workforce on short-time work during the lockdown and there was, generally, a sharp drop in profits. On the other hand, the pandemic has also accelerated some positive advancements in the automotive industry. The increased focus on digital channels, for instance, can be seen as a positive outcome and chance to improve stakeholder relations. Especially regarding the fact

⁵ American automobile manufacturer founded in 2003, known mainly for its electric automobiles. It became very popular in a short time (Schreiber & Gregersen, 2024).

that there is a gradient of 13% in online engagement across industries in Europe, being online is not a choice, but a necessity.

However, the McKinsey 2019 Digital Quotient analysis shows that players in the automotive industry are still quite uncertain about the use of digital channels, while other industries are already making greater use of them. The assessment of the general digital maturity level of an automotive company revealed that there is a clear need for digitalization in this sector (Hofstätter et al., 2020).

The BMW Group, on the other hand, has already started to use digital channels more to its advantage and, for example, did not present the BMW Concept i4 at a trade show, as usual, but instead presented it completely digitally via a live stream and on their social media channels (Thoms, 2020).

The automobile manufacturer Mercedes-Benz has also decided on a similar strategic direction and announced an innovative news format “Meet Mercedes DIGITAL” in May 2020 (spurred on by the pandemic and its social distancing obligation). This can be found on its digital platform Mercedes me media (now Mercedes-Benz Media). It not only presents the latest products, but also provides media representatives and other interested groups with updates on the company's developments. It also features moderated shows with expert talks. In addition, all the information discussed is made available online for download in various visual formats (*Mercedes-Benz Media*, n.d.; Van Den Moortel, 2020).

Furthermore, in recent years, the German automotive industry has been particularly criticized for its unclear and therefore untransparent supply chain, which means that it is now important for many automotive companies to establish sustainable supply chain management (Wissuwa & Durach, 2023).

New research has shown that the adoption of blockchain technology can be used as a new tool that not only helps to reduce costs in general, but also has the potential to easily consolidate product information and optimize the supply chain management so that the transparency level increases. In today's data and value-driven world, fueled by rapid technological change, blockchain technology offers a platform where trusted information can be securely exchanged (Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames, 2019; Ko et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2022). One of the reasons for this is that the origin of car components is easy to trace. This is particularly important nowadays given sustainability requirements and to ensure that overall quality and safety standards are met (Wellbrock et al., 2020). Regarding the tough

competition that companies in the automotive industry are facing, the rightful use of blockchain enables companies to get a competitive advantage (Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames, 2019).

However, for the report about The Global PR and Communication Model 2021, when asked which communication challenges companies will face in the next five years, 18,8% of the PR & Communication experts answered, “Building and maintaining legitimacy/trust” (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management & Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership, 2021, p. 14). Consequently, besides the general challenges that the automotive companies are facing, while tackling these challenges, they also need to build, and keep, both legitimacy as well as trust. The study by Kim and Lee (2018) showed that companies can build trust above all if they communicate their CSR initiatives in a transparent manner. Furthermore, to build trust, in addition to relational transparency, it is also recommended to maintain stakeholder relationships by focusing on authenticity and inclusivity (Meintjes, 2021). Another concept that plays a role in building trust is legitimacy, what is defined in the scientific community as “a generalized perception or assumption that the action of an entity is desirable, proper, or appropriate with some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Research therefore suggests that the inclusion of the employee perspective is also essential to prevent information deficiencies (Pichler et al., 2021). Further, Borgstedt et al. (2019) analyzed legitimacy strategies and identified four clusters: (1) Signaling, (2) Ambitious, (3) Unconcerned, and (4) Careless. The automotive companies BMW, as well as Mercedes-Benz (still called Daimler in this research), and Volkswagen were placed in the ambitious cluster, since a high level of transparency was found in the disclosure of their objectives. The study also found that most of the objectives disclosed are on the one hand in the category of responsibility for products, and on the other hand on the use of services and in the category of emissions and energy consumption. BMW is mentioned as a good example, as according to the analysis carried out, the company does communicate its objectives transparently to its stakeholders and offers follow-ups in which previous objectives are discussed by explaining the extent to which they have been met.

While the automotive industry in general continues to be a major contributor to global CO₂ emissions, a downward trend is evident for the first time in a long time. Most of this reduction in emissions is due to the development and introduction of various innovations

such as catalytic converters and new battery technology. For the future, it is therefore necessary that in the development of new technology, the integration of renewable energies continues to be a requirement. Furthermore, a way to overcome the scarcity of resources should be also a key focus (Williams & Blyth, 2023).

However, for the efforts of sustainability to be successful, companies in the German automotive industry must first have a clear understanding and definition of sustainability. It is also crucial to structurally integrate sustainability throughout the organization. However, this can only happen if top management supports it, and all company systems are networked with each other. Sustainability efforts are therefore an integral part of a corporate strategy and also corporate communication, as a company's sustainability profile is only authentic if it is reflected in all of the company's activities, hence in all external and internal communication (Bittner-Fessler & Weicht, 2020; Held et al., 2018; Signitzer & Prexl, 2013).

As the authors Hofstätter et al. (2020) outline in their paper, it becomes clear that the automotive industry has reached a point where you either decide to take the path where the companies either embark on a path of further development, accepting the challenges or they continue as before, which may not be successful in the long run. These challenges, however, can lead to a loss of trust in the company, that the company can only rebuild with a well-devised strategy.

2.3.6. Transparency in the automotive industry

Nowadays, legal regulations require companies to disclose relevant data about their activities to achieve transparency. This can be fulfilled both through the publication of annual reports, sustainability reports, or corporate responsibility reports (Pichler & Lehner, 2017).

More companies than ever before are openly reporting the origin of their products, as well as the results of product tests or compliance with labor standards (Sodhi & Tang, 2019). In their study, the authors Sodhi and Tang (2019) concluded that "gaining supply chain visibility is a prerequisite for providing supply chain transparency" (p. 2957). Further, the authors define supply chain transparency as "a company disclosing information to the public, including consumers and investors, about upstream operations and about the products it sells to consumers" (p. 2946). Given that this growing trend is evident across industries, supply chain transparency is in particular a widely discussed topic in the automotive industry and

must therefore be taken into account when analyzing transparency in this industry (Sodhi & Tang, 2019; Wissuwa & Durach, 2023).

Research has previously pointed out that to achieve transparency “sharing product data and collaborating in product development across firm borders are quite common practices in the automotive industry today” (Hultman & Axelsson, 2007, p. 633). The scholars have also highlighted that, in this industry, an important aspect to note is that with the growing emphasis on the production of platforms and collaborative product development, which usually crosses company borders, it is important to consistently exchange technical data (Hultman & Axelsson, 2007).

In recent years, the practices of the automotive industry have been scrutinized by the media and other stakeholder groups. Furthermore, regulatory requirements, for example with regard to CO₂ emissions, are also increasing (Sukitsch et al., 2015). In Germany, it is also the case that there are specific guidelines regarding the fuel consumption labels of new vehicles online. Concerning social media, for example, the requirements are that the fuel consumption and CO₂ emission figures must be directly legible on the post, without having to click on "find out more". The aim of this is to ensure that a potential customer can also take this information into account when making a purchase decision (Von Der Osten, 2019).

However, the analysis by Sukitsch et al. (2015) showed that although some companies are aware of the importance of sustainability, they are still lagging behind. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that the automotive industry has been regularly confronted with greenwashing accusations due to non-transparent environmental reporting. Companies must therefore be careful, since if used incorrectly, even sustainability and corporate sustainability reports can also be seen as an instrument for greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Hoffhaus, 2011). When doing greenwashing, a company tries to present itself better by, for example, communicating only positive information about its ecological or social activities and omitting negative information. Doing this can lead to great damage to companies, which is a paradox, as Hoffhaus (2011) has pointed out. Therefore, the companies that want to present themselves well, achieve exactly the opposite, namely that the reputation of the brand, trust in the products, and their corporate reputation are negatively affected (Hoffhaus, 2011).

An example of the biggest greenwashing scandal in the automotive industry until today is the VW Diesel scandal (also called Dieselgate). In 2015, the US Environmental Protection

Agency (EPA) discovered that Volkswagen illegally used a software in their diesel vehicles that falsified emission values. This was especially controversial since the German car manufacturer had promoted these VW diesel cars as being clean. After the forgery became public, VW did not just lose billions, but also lost the trust of various stakeholders (Jong & Van Der Linde, 2022; Jung & Sharon, 2019).

Researchers have claimed that it became a benchmark for future crises in the automotive industry, since the competitors are going to be directly compared with this case in the event of comparable misconduct. They therefore suggest that it is important to adapt crisis communication strategies so that the response is timely and communication is both fact-based and transparent (Jong & Van Der Linde, 2022). Valentini and Kruckeberg (2018) also emphasized that focusing only on short-term economic goals can represent a major financial risk in the long term and, particularly in the case of the Dieselgate scandal, the disregard for sustainability requirements ultimately represented a much greater financial implication than if sustainable products were directly applied. Research therefore suggests that automotive companies must adapt their organizational structures in order to be able to implement their sustainability goals at the operational level. Quantified, transparent, and clearly defined targets are thus essential to enable companies in making the transition from, for example, pure reporting to the actual execution, which ultimately has the power to avoid another scandal (Wolff et al., 2020). Therefore, if the VW greenwashing scandal has taught the automotive industry something, it is that just communicating more sustainable features is not enough without actually implementing greener solutions already in the production of the cars (like a more sustainable interior and supply chain), and overall showing engagement toward a cleaner future (Majláth & Ricordel, 2021; Wellbrock et al., 2020; Wolff et al., 2020).

The findings in this chapter highlight the necessity to incorporate transparency into the corporate digital communication practices of the German automotive industry. Transparent communication has a considerable significance in the automotive industry for several reasons. Firstly, the automotive industry has struggled with trust issues among stakeholders in the past, particularly in connection with scandals such as CO₂ emissions manipulation. Second, there is a growing consumer interest on sustainability that reflects in the production of cars as well, which on the other hand needs to be communicated properly. Third, ever stricter legal regulatory requirements must also be complied with. In conclusion, automotive

companies that communicate transparently and make their efforts towards sustainability and social responsibility clear can demonstrably gain more than just a competitive advantage. Studies on transparent communication have already shown that it has the power to restore consumer trust and build a company's reputation. The following empirical study therefore aims to show the extent to which these elements can be influenced in the digital world. It also examines how factors such as detailed product information and CSR reports can affect the perceived transparency of digital corporate communication in the changing German automotive industry. The dynamic interplay of all these points has never been studied in this form before, especially with the strong focus on digital corporate communication.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research objectives and hypotheses

The theoretical considerations described above show that transparency is a highly discussed topic that can be defined and interpreted in many ways depending on the point of view. Therefore, the implementation is always different, as is the focus on achieving transparency and integrating it into the corporate communication strategies. In the automotive industry in particular, the topic of transparency is becoming increasingly important, with companies themselves addressing why they are transparent. Due to the increasing relevance of digital communication, which the automotive industry is also progressively turning to, the research question is *what role does transparency play in the digital corporate communication of German automotive companies, and how do they implement it?*

The following qualitative analysis therefore seeks to develop theories and recommendations on how automotive companies can communicate transparently in today's digital world. Consequently, the following three research objectives are to be achieved:

- 1) Determining the importance of transparency in digital corporate communication for German automotive companies;
- 2) Filling the scientific gap about transparent digital communication of automotive companies;
- 3) Be able to derive how transparency can generally be used more effectively in digital corporate communication.

Based on the research question and research objectives, the following hypotheses can be derived, which are tested by using quantitative empirical data:

*Hypothesis 1: Automotive companies that **share product information** in their digital corporate communications are perceived as more **transparent** than those that do not.*

There is a growing trend towards open reporting of product origin and compliance information, which also contributes to supply chain transparency (Sodhi & Tang, 2019). In general, different researchers share the opinion that information helps to improve the perceived transparency of automotive companies (Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames, 2019; Ko et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2022). Further, by offering detailed product information the companies would follow an information strategy that has the power to clarify the understanding of certain company decisions according to Cornelissen (2020). And as the focus on sustainability continues to increase, attention should also be paid to this when publishing this information as well as quality assurance (Wellbrock et al., 2020). In addition, Tafesse and Wien (2017) found that sharing expert reviews and product features on social media increase transparency and credibility. The first hypothesis therefore aims to investigate whether automotive companies can improve the perceived transparency of their digital corporate communication by sharing comprehensive product information.

Hypothesis 2: The publication of CSR reports on an automotive company's website leads to a higher perception of transparency compared to automotive companies that do not publish CSR reports.

The information provided in the literature review illustrates the increasing social expectations and the need to address issues such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainability. Corporate websites in particular have become important platforms for reporting on CSR activities and communicating corporate identity to various stakeholders (Capurro et al., 2023; Reilly & Hynan, 2014; Rolland & O'Keefe Bazzoni, 2009). Ula and Vural's (2019) study highlights the role of social media in the organization of CSR initiatives and other activities at the corporate level.

Integrating sustainability into corporate operations is therefore crucial to align corporate identity with the company's behavior, especially in sectors such as the automotive industry

where environmental concerns are of growing importance (Paliderova et al., 2015; Paurova & Chlebkova, 2020; Wellbrock et al., 2020). Thus, the second hypothesis aims to find out whether companies in the automotive industry are perceived as more transparent when they publish CSR reports on their corporate websites.

*Hypothesis 3: A high **transparency** level of the digital corporate communication has an positive impact on the **corporate reputation** perceived by consumers of German automotive companies.*

It becomes clear that a high level of transparency in corporate communications can have a positive impact on corporate reputation and it can also be seen as one of the principles of building a strong reputation (Baesecke, 2015; Fombrun & Foss, 2001). There are several reasons to focus on building a good reputation. For instance, the opportunity to increase customer loyalty and to attract potential top candidates for jobs. Further, it can also help companies stand out from the competition (Fombrun and Foss, 2001).

It is important to note that with increasing digitalization and cybersecurity, companies are facing some challenges that need to be considered when building good corporate communications. Thus, a focus on innovative content for social media and the avoidance of misinformation through the sharing of transparent and reliable information is recommended (Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies, 2023). DiStaso and Bortree (2012) and Eck (2012) also emphasize that transparent communication in social media can help companies with reputation management in order to improve stakeholder relations.

As the literature review also makes clear, the automotive industry is often accused of greenwashing due to non-transparent environmental reporting. Transparent communication, especially about sustainability, should therefore be essential in order to help avoid greenwashing and to protect the company's reputation.

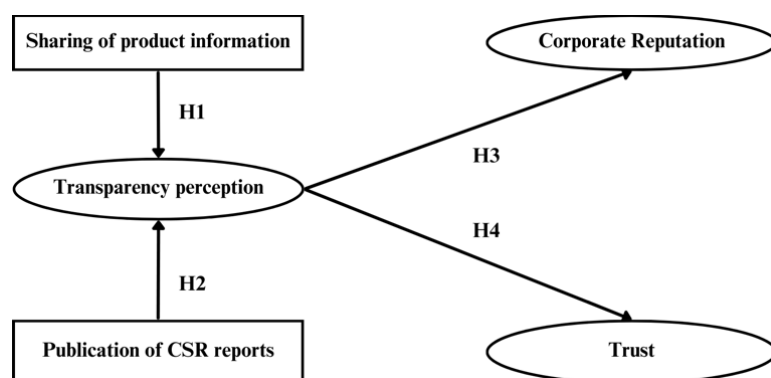
Based on this information, the present hypothesis therefore aims to find out whether the interplay between transparency in a company's digital communication also has a positive influence on the perceived reputation of German automotive companies.

*Hypothesis 4: The higher the perception of digital corporate communication transparency of German automobile companies, the more **trust** consumers have in the companies.*

Research around the Global PR and Communication Model 2021 underlines the increasing importance of trust in corporate communications (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management & Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership, 2021). Companies are increasingly recognizing the need to build and maintain legitimacy and trust among stakeholders, as communication experts emphasize. Studies also emphasize that the transparent nature of CSR initiatives, in particular, is crucial for building trust among stakeholders (Kim & Lee, 2018). In addition, maintaining transparency of actions and regularly sharing information through platforms such as blogs and social media can also enhance stakeholder trust (Eck, 2012). In the automotive industry, specific challenges such as a lack of transparency regarding the history of the car and a general lack of trust are prevalent (Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames, 2019). However, it must always be borne in mind that, as the researcher Thøger Christensen stated back in 2002, while information is a prerequisite for gaining knowledge and insights, it is still necessary to have an existing knowledge framework in advance in order to be able to process new information better. This is the only way to avoid mistrust. The author therefore recommends that transparency should not be equated with the availability of information but should be integrated into corporate strategies. This study therefore aims to determine whether transparency in the digital corporate communication of German automotive companies can address stakeholder concerns and increase their trustworthiness.

The following model was created to visualize the relationship between the four hypotheses.

Figure 6: *Proposed hypothesis model*



Note. Own illustration of the proposed four hypotheses.

3.2. Object of study

In preparation for the interviews and the creation of the experimental survey questionnaire, a preliminary investigation was conducted to assess the transparency practices communicated online by the leading German automotive companies. The main company websites of the Mercedes-Benz Group, BMW Group, Audi AG, Volkswagen Group and Porsche AG were therefore examined, and the information briefly summarized. The aim of this is to get an even better feeling for the attitude of the automotive companies towards the topic of transparency. Please note that this research was conducted in mid-2024, company websites may change over time.

This process was systematically conducted by initially checking whether the topic of transparency was directly listed in the menu bar of the company websites. If this was not the case, each mentioned topic was looked through step by step to find out whether the topic could be found intuitively. If no information was found using this procedure, then the term "transparency" was entered in the search function and the relevant information was read. This search was carried out in February 2024.

Examining the corporate websites of some of the biggest German automotive companies reveals that the topic of transparency is addressed in different ways. For instance, on the Mercedes-Benz website, the section labeled "Advocacy" under "Responsibility", features the topic of "Transparency". Here the company articulates its belief that "democracy needs transparency"(para. 1), and transparency is seen as the "decisive trust factor for successful advocacy" (para. 1). They emphasize how they want to provide information and abide by the rules posed by various registers. The company therefore draws attention to the fact that they publish the Mercedes-Benz Group's climate policy report, which provides information on the positions the company takes regarding the environment and its political lobbying work. In addition to providing information on their website, one can also open a document that outlines the company's commitment to transparency. In there, it becomes clear where, besides the public registers all over the world, they also make information available to the public.

On the other hand, Porsche's official corporate website focuses mainly on product communication. However, the company also offers an official media portal called "newsroom" where company-related topics are also addressed. Therefore, this website was examined more closely instead. Here you can also find statements on sustainability, history

and values of the company. Under "Sustainability", visitors can also find information on "Supply Chain Responsibility" and "Governance and Transparency". In the transparency section they also make a special mention on the importance of transparency and the associated communication, emphasizing that Porsche takes care to talk openly about issues with its stakeholders. They justify this by pointing out that this is essential for the success of a company (Porsche AG, 2023).

Moreover, on the BMW Group website, there is no separate window on the subject of transparency. However, under the "About Us" tab and then "Our Culture and Values", the company mentions that transparency is one of its five core values. They therefore state that "we do not embellish, but point out contradictions constructively. We act with integrity and talk to each other. This is the only way to create trust and bring our visions onto the streets" (para. 4). This statement underlines BMW's commitment to not sugarcoat information but instead, that they are committed to act ethically and transparently. Under "Sustainability" one will also find a lot of information about the supply chain and what Mercedes-Benz is doing to ensure the most sustainable supply chain possible. As the literature review shows, this topic is also very important for building transparency (Wissuwa & Durach, 2023).

Audi's corporate website, on the other hand, mentions transparency in connection with its materiality analysis, which can be found in the website section about their sustainability concept. Here, the company examines the impact Audi has on the environment and society and evaluates this by keeping the priorities of the stakeholders in mind. This is done by analyzing internal and external sources first, then identifying key sustainability topics, and concluding an online survey with stakeholders, where the identified topics are then prioritized. On the website, Audi also quotes Roxana Codita of the Audi Corporate Responsibility Team, stating that Audi uses the materiality analysis as a strategic tool to create transparency, followed by explaining that this analysis also contributes to the review of corporate goals, use of resources, and sustainable commitment of the company (Audi AG, 2024-a). Furthermore, Audi has a complete section dedicated to documents and policies where website visitors can download corporate guidelines, charters, reports, and statements (Audi AG, 2024-b). Among the corporate guidelines, Audi also publishes its "Advertising and Communication Principles", in which the company emphasizes that they are committed to acting transparently in their internal and external communication (Audi AG, 2024-c).

Volkswagen Group, to which Audi also belongs, also declares on their corporate website, under "Corporate Governance" and the "ESG Controversies", that their entire website is focused on addressing current controversies in an objective and factual manner to increase transparency for all stakeholders. Visitors are therefore encouraged to explore the website content, provide feedback, and suggest additional topics that need clarification. With this process, VW Group aims besides transparency, to promote an open and constructive dialog. This, in turn, in their opinion can have a positive influence on stakeholder relationships.

For instance, Audi as part of the Volkswagen Group, clearly presents its activities on its corporate website to make stakeholder management as effective as possible. They divide their level of engagement into five parts, or what they call five management tools, to gain a better understanding of the needs of each group. Firstly, they want to inform their stakeholders about company activities through one-way communication on their website, with the help of their company reports and various campaigns. Secondly, the exchange with relevant stakeholders also plays a central role, whereby they get in touch with them via social media, conduct surveys with them or use an established mailbox to receive feedback. However, they also want to actively involve their stakeholders through panel discussions or conferences. Their fourth way of staying in touch with stakeholders is through participation in initiatives and memberships. Finally, they try to show accountability through internal committees or working groups (Audi AG, n.d.).

BMW names in their Stakeholder Engagement Policy 2019 "Business partners, suppliers, community interest groups, media, political and academic leaders, industry associations, NGOs, [and] investors" (p.1) among others as their stakeholder groups. Above all, they emphasize how important it is to take into account the different expectations of the company and the views of the groups and they also mention the important role of transparency in that they want to show their activities and decisions transparently, with a transparent corporate culture, and a transparent organization. In this process, BMW shows a similar approach to Audi in their way of communicating with stakeholders (both one-way and two-way communication via reports, social media campaigns, online surveys, forums and roundtables, etc.).

They argue that they can both shape their reputation and reduce risks. Therefore, they believe that their stakeholders will benefit from an open and transparent way of communicating.

It quickly becomes clear that companies do not only try to offer access to corporate information but what is communicated to the public by the German automotive companies is, on the one hand, the desire to establish a dialog with the respective stakeholders, which in turn is increasingly possible thanks to the many possibilities in the digital world.

In summary, it can be said that it is clear that all companies provide statements on transparency, but even a brief search reveals discrepancies in accessibility and depth of these statements. An overview can be found in appendix B, which outlines additional criteria that can lead to the transparency perception of automotive companies and indicates whether these criteria were identifiable on the selected company websites.

Further, since a self-created Instagram post was included in the experimental survey, some of the German Instagram pages of the automotive companies were examined during this preparation phase. When it comes to macro-specific Instagram pages, the automotive companies BMW, Audi, VW, Porsche, and Mercedes-Benz all use a similar approach, which means that their social media presence is country-specific. Upon reviewing the Instagram accounts, it is clear that the car companies comply with the EU regulations, often disclosing both the energy consumption and the CO₂ emissions when presenting their vehicles. It is interesting to see that BMW Germany in particular is very detail-oriented and provides a lot of information and also indicates where the consumer can find more information. Volkswagen Germany and Audi Germany also provide the necessary data and refer to further legal information but are briefer in their captions.

The following study aims to find out in more detail exactly what strategy German automotive companies are pursuing to implement transparency in their digital corporate communications and to compare these results with the perception of the most important stakeholder group, the consumers.

3.3. Research Design

To provide more clarity on the role of transparency in the digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry, it is important to consider the different experiences and opinions of communication experts as well as the opinions of stakeholders themselves. A mixed-method approach was therefore chosen to find answers to the

objectives, hypotheses, and ultimately the main research question. This approach therefore combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques and aims to offer a broader perspective and deeper insights than either method could provide alone. Researchers have concluded that the combination of both approaches can lead to the emerging distortions of one method being neutralized or even eliminated by the use of the other method (Creswell, 2009).

Moreover, the quantitative and qualitative data was collected using the traditional “concurrent triangulation strategy” (Creswell, 2009, p. 196), where the researcher collects both forms of data at the same time and later compares them with each other to find out whether there are differences or similarities. The main reason for collecting data simultaneously was the sometimes very limited and predetermined dates of the interview partners, which meant that the interviews started in March 2024 and lasted until May 2024. Further, it was thus possible to also significantly shorten the data collection period compared to a sequential approach (Creswell, 2009). The used methodological approach therefore includes a quantitative experimental online survey and ten semi-structured guideline-based expert interviews.

To investigate the research question and to be able to make concrete statements, especially about the role of transparency in digital corporate communication in the German automotive industry, a quantitative experimental online survey was conducted with a 2 x 2 between-subjects design. This makes it possible to investigate causality and to find out if there is a relationship between the variables (Mize, 2019; Schnabel, 2021). The quantitative method therefore helped to understand the opinion of people towards transparency in digital corporate communication since it was able to “test the impact of a treatment (or an intervention) on an outcome, controlling for all other factors that might influence that outcome” (Creswell, 2009, p. 137). Online surveys in general have established themselves as a popular research method due to the increasing number of internet users, which simplifies the recruitment of many participants (Denissen et al. 2010; Evans & Mathur, 2005). Another advantage is that this variant is easy, fast, and inexpensive. Then, the evaluation of the responses is also simple (Evans & Mathur, 2005; Schnabel, 2021). Moreover, conducting the survey online enables to integrate “multimedia elements such as images, audio clips, and video clips” (Schnabel, 2021, p. 7). This advantage was applied in this study since a fictitious Instagram post and company website were inserted in the survey. The participants in the

survey were then randomly divided into two groups and received two treatments each. After each stimulus, the perceived transparency of the contribution, company reputation, and trust was queried. The randomization was carried out by the survey program.

Since transparency is a rather complex phenomenon, the choice was also made to additionally conduct ten semi-structured qualitative expert interviews. The aim of these was to take a more in-depth look at the concept of transparency in the digital communication German automotive industry and draw new insights from it (Brosius et al., 2016). The reason to make the interview partially unstructured was because it creates more flexibility to respond spontaneously to the respective interviewee and also to adapt the order of the questions to the course of the interview, while having a guideline. This approach is intended to increase the chance that new and unexpected content will develop in the process as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the interviewee's opinions through an interactive conversation (Creswell, 2009; Döring, 2023).

3.4. Experimental Online Survey

3.4.1. Survey Sample

The German-speaking population with an internet connection is defined as the basic population of the study, as the study was conducted in Germany and focuses on the German automotive industry. The minimum age to participate in the study was 18, since that is the age at which people living in Germany are legally eligible to drive alone and therefore start to be particularly interesting as consumers (Bundesministerium für Digitales und Verkehr, 2010). Further, the Allensbach Market and Advertising Media Analysis 2023 found that the 14-19 age group is the smallest group when it comes to buying high-quality or exclusive brands, which includes German cars. In addition, the study identified that in 2023, approximately 21.9% of luxury-oriented consumers were between 50 and 59 years old (Lohmeier, 2024). Therefore, it was also possible to specify over 60 years in the survey. The software program Qualtrics, which can be used to create surveys quickly and easily, was used to create the experimental online questionnaire. The survey was made public on April 11 and stayed online until May 31.

To calculate the needed number of participants for the survey, the power and effect size must be considered (Creswell, 2009). For this purpose, “researchers set values for these three

factors (e.g., $\alpha = .05$, $\text{power} = .80$, and $\text{effect size} = .50$)” (Creswell, 2009, p.148 as cited in Cohen, 1997; Lipsey 1990). Therefore, with the help of a sampling size calculator, it was determined that to recruit enough respondents a sample size of at least 385 people is necessary. Having a big enough sample size is important to generalize the results to our defined population (Kitchenham & Pfleeger, 2002).

To recruit as many participants as possible, a combination of purposive and convenience selection was used. The purposive selection took place by sharing the link in various Facebook groups and on other social media channels. Furthermore, the convenience selection was applied by asking the participants, friends, family, and acquaintances to participate in the survey. Since they were also asked to share the survey with others, this particular selection was expanded using the snowball technique. Thanks to this sampling method, the survey reached people that would have been hard to recruit (Kitchenham & Pfleeger, 2002). Since the procedure only took place in a period of one month, it can be defined as being cross-sectional instead of longitudinal where the data is collected over a longer period of time. (Creswell, 2009).

3.4.2. Operationalization and structure of the online survey

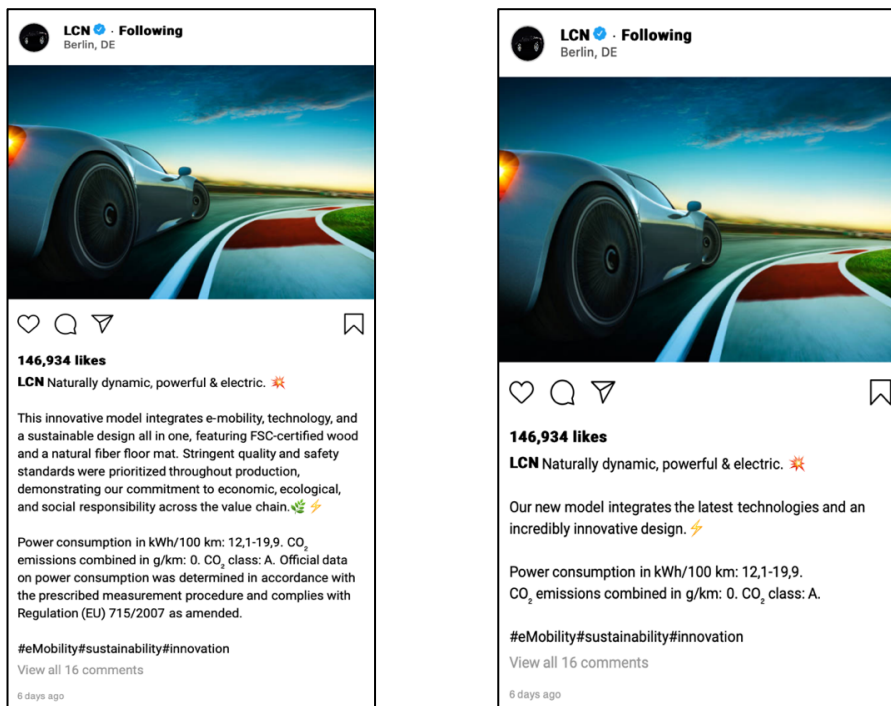
Various constructs needed to be operationalized, therefore several scales were used to build the questionnaire of the experimental online survey. Socio-demographic characteristics were also collected from participants, including their age, location, gender and current occupation. This information serves to understand the respondents’ backgrounds. The gender and location variables served as filter questions at the beginning of the survey, as the target group were people over 18 years old and living in Germany.

Stimuli of the experimental online survey

To be able to answer the hypotheses, the participants in the experimental group received an Instagram post with a “high” transparency level and the control group received an Instagram post with a “low” transparency level. In the beginning, both groups were first shown an introduction text. To this end, an imaginary automotive brand named LCN was created for the content used in the Instagram posts. Care was taken to ensure that both the profile picture and the post picture did not show a German car brand so that existing preconceptions about a particular brand would not influence the responses. For this reason, a computer-generated image produced by James Teoh was selected. Both Instagram posts

showed the same car picture. The difference between the two posts was that the post with a high transparency level offers in the caption information about the new vehicle, the sustainable interior design, and the value chain, as well as compliance with quality and safety standards during production. These points have been found in research to lead to transparency or to be important in order to be perceived as transparent (Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames, 2019; Ko et al., 2018; Sodhi & Tang, 2019; Xu et al., 2022). The control group received a similar stimulus, but it was created in such a way that this additional information was omitted and just the mandatory data like the power consumption and the CO₂ emissions was shown. Figure 8 shows both Instagram posts side by side.

Figure 7: Stimulus - Instagram post



Note. Own production based on various Instagram posts from the BMW, Audi, and Mercedes brands in 2023 and 2024. On the left is the Instagram post with a lot of product and company information and on the right is the post of the control group, which received little information.

The inspiration for both Instagram posts was taken from different existing Instagram and Facebook posts from the German automotive companies BMW, Audi, and Mercedes-Benz. Even though the EU directives mentioned in the description exist, the CO₂ figures provided are completely made up. The next step was to query if the post was perceived to be

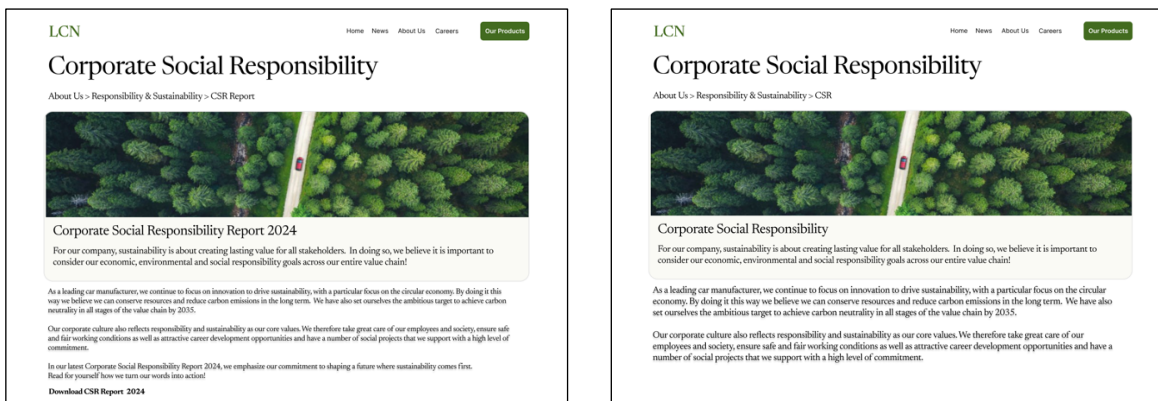
transparent using the scale by Rawlins (2008), which is explained in detail further below. Both versions are currently used similarly by German automotive companies to present their products. The aim of the study will also be to find out which is considered more transparent.

A further stimulus was then shown so that hypothesis 2 could be evaluated. The experimental group was shown an introduction text and then the page of a company's website of the fictional car manufacturer was displayed, where the participants could see that the German automotive company recently published its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) report, and one could also download it. The fictitious website presents comprehensive information about the company's environmental, social and economic initiatives, as well as stakeholder engagement and ethical business practices. Again, several existing corporate website pages from German automotive companies such as BMW, Mercedes, Audi, and Volkswagen were used as templates to generate the text shown to make it as close to reality as possible but still as described in the literature review, to integrate the points that have been identified as transparent in the research (Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies, 2023; European Commission, n.d.-b; Kaley, 2019; Paliderova et al., 2015; Paurova & Chlebkova, 2020; Reilly & Hynan, 2014; Rolland & O'Keefe Bazzoni, 2009). Further, care was taken to ensure that it is also very similar to the existing websites in terms of language and can almost be seen as a summary of various statements of the mentioned companies.

On the other hand, the control group received almost the same stimulus, the only difference was that the information about the publishing of the CSR report was missing. They therefore received a different introductory text. The chosen photo on the website shows a car in the middle of a forest. Thus, no exact car brand is recognizable here either. The photo chosen belongs to Borchee (2021) and was selected so that it fits thematically. Figure 9 shows the comparison between the two website stimuli.

In the next step, it was also questioned if the post was perceived to be transparent. Further, so that hypothesis 3 and hypothesis 4 can be analyzed, the participants then had to answer questions about how the participants evaluate the company's reputation and their trust in the company. Thus, they were shown the following sentence: "*Considering the TWO IMAGES presented, answer the following questions*".

Figure 8: *Stimulus – Corporate Website*



Note. The website with the information about the publication of a CSR report is on the left and the website without the information in this context is on the right. Own composition and presentation based on the corporate websites of BMW, Mercedes, Audi, and Volkswagen on sustainability and responsibility.

Next, the scales used in the online experiment survey are explained in detail.

Organizational Transparency

In this study, organizational transparency is a dependent variable which, according to Rawlins (2008), can be divided into four dimensions, namely “Participate”, “Substantial Information”, “Accountable” and “Secrecy”, fitting the presented definition previously. The instrument therefore first asks about “overall transparency”, then whether the “communication efforts are participative”, if the “communication efforts provide substantial information”, whether the “communication efforts provide accountability” and finally whether “communication efforts are secretive”. For this study, the scale was changed from a 7-point scale to a 5-point scale for the sake of simplicity and ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The instrument established by Rawlins has a total of 27 items. Since transparency is asked twice in the questionnaire, some items were simplified and adjustments were made, such as removing redundant words like “people like me”. This happened before and after the pretest in order to shorten the questionnaire.

Corporate Reputation

Similar to transparency, corporate reputation is also a theoretical construct that is not easy to measure. According to Walsh et al. (2009), it therefore needs to be split into five dimensions called “Customer Orientation”, “Good Employer”, “Reliable and Financially Strong Company”, “Social and Environmental Responsibility” and “Product and Service

Quality”. For this study, an adapted version of the short scale was used. As a result, only 10 of the 15 items were used, by offering the participants the choice to indicate their level of agreement from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" on a 5-point Likert scale.

Trust

The concept of trust can be measured, according to Rawlins (2008), by segmenting the concept into 13 Items divided into four dimensions called “Overall Trust”, “Organization shows competence”, “Organization shows integrity” and “Organization shows goodwill”. Similar to the other instruments, a five-point scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" was used. In addition, after the pre-test feedback, three items also were abbreviated to ensure that the survey could be carried out more quickly.

The final number of items of all constructs can be found in appendix C. Further, the complete survey questionnaire was added to appendix D. In order to determine internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for all presented constructs. Cronbach's alpha was always above .8 and .9, the internal consistency was therefore high to excellent, as can be seen in appendix E (Blanz, 2021).

To check the participants' attention, the following control question was asked in between the query; "For this question, please ignore the following options and select "Strongly agree". The respondents who selected this incorrectly were not evaluated. This question also falls in favor of the validity of the study, as it ensures that the participants understand the questions asked correctly and respond appropriately (Creswell, 2009).

Survey pre-test

The pre-test phase ran from the 3rd of April to the 9th of April to see if the stimuli were perceived correctly and if there were any differences between the answers to the scales and thus also ensure the validity of the measurement (Boateng et al., 2018). There were two pre-tests, as some negative feedback was received quite quickly during the first pre-test, that the survey was too long. A total of 12 people took part in the first pre-test and 11 in the second. All participants were personally directly invited and consisted of family and friends, which guaranteed an honest and detailed feedback to the survey. Furthermore, some minor adjustments were made after the first pre-test, such as deleting some statements that caused confusion or could not be answered with the information provided in the stimuli, and adding

sentences at the top of each new questionnaire page so that the participants knew the question was referring to the presented automotive company. Originally, the procedure of the first pre-test was that transparency as well as company reputation and trust were queried after each stimulus. After receiving the feedback, a new structure was applied where only transparency was inquired after each stimulus. Reputation and trust were queried after both stimuli had been viewed. No changes were made to the stimuli, as these were perceived as intended. When evaluating the pre-test data, particular emphasis was also placed on ensuring that the randomization into the experimental and control groups worked. This was confirmed, as of the final 11 people, 6 were assigned to the experimental group and 5 to the control group. To test the internal consistency of the scales, which in turn makes it possible to make statements about reliability, Cronbach's alpha was also calculated with the second pre-test data before starting the survey (Möhring & Schlütz, 2013). Almost all scales showed an acceptable value and can also be found in the appendix E.

3.4.3. Quantitative data analysis procedures

The survey data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. In this study, both the perception of transparency and the stimulus with product information and CSR reports were identified as independent variables. The dependent variables in this study are company reputation, trust, and perceived transparency. First, the descriptive statistics of the individual variables were examined, and all necessary methodological requirements were checked. Then the hypotheses were tested with the help of t-tests for independent samples and correlation tests. These two statistical procedures are suitable because, on the one hand, the t-tests for independent samples are used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of two independent groups. In our case, this would be the control and experimental group, allowing us to evaluate hypotheses 1 and 2. On the other hand, the correlation analysis examines the relationship between two variables (Hemmerich, n.d.-a; Hemmerich, n.d.-b). This is needed to evaluate hypotheses 3 and 4.

The pretest data was downloaded in advance and was therefore not included in the final evaluation. In total, 318 individuals participated in the experimental online survey. However, this data set needed to be cleaned up before the evaluation with SPSS began, primarily removing cases due to dropouts and the location and age filters. Consequently, 128 incomplete questionnaires were removed. It was also checked whether the control question had been answered correctly in both groups. Unfortunately, 17 participants answered it

incorrectly. However, these cases were checked again individually and as no further anomalies or tendencies were found, these questionnaires were not excluded from the analysis, which led to a final sample size of $N = 190$.

Further, before starting the statistical analysis, some variables had to be transformed to fulfill the requirements of the statistical tests. According to research, the items were combined into the needed scales. Since the dimension “secrecy”, which is part of the construct of transparency, was coded inversely, the corresponding four items had to be recoded for both groups as well as after each stimulus. Further specific transformations for hypothesis testing are presented in the results section.

3.5. Interviews with Communication Experts

3.5.1. Selection of interviewees

A purposive sampling approach was selected for this study, where top communication managers from leading German automotive companies such as BMW, Audi, and Mercedes-Benz were consciously selected. This approach is often used in qualitative research because it helps to identify the experts who can make informative statements related to the phenomenon being researched (Palinkas et al., 2015). Due to the difficulty of finding interview partners in the top management of automotive companies who were willing to provide information, the selection was broadened during the recruitment phase. This means that in addition to the communication experts currently working at those automotive companies, the interviews were also conducted with experts who have worked in German automotive companies in the past, communications consultants in the German automotive industry, and also communications managers working for German automotive companies such as Audi and Mercedes-Benz in Portugal. In the last-mentioned case, the managers were asked to always answer the questions considering the German brand. Therefore, it can be summarized that the most important criteria for the selection of the interview partners was their competence in the areas of corporate communications and experience in the automotive industry. Six of the interviewees were selected with the help of personal contacts, while the rest of the participants were recruited on LinkedIn. This platform is also where most of the rejections were received. Out of 25 requests made, nine individuals did not respond, four had too busy schedules and one explained that they were focusing on their own students in the company who needed help with their thesis. In the end, a total of ten people were

successfully recruited as interview partners. Table 3 shows an overview of the interview participants, with the allowed information.

The ten interviews were conducted between March 15 and May 23, 2024 via Microsoft Teams. One interview was conducted by telephone on personal request. The duration of the interviews varied between 17 and 50 minutes.

Table 3: *Overview of Interviewees*

Name or Codename	Job Position or Area of Expertise	Current Company	Experience
Alexandra Landers	Head of Product Communications - Corporate and Governmental Affairs	BMW Group	+ 20 Years
SSB	Stakeholder & Social media Communication	German automotive manufacturer	+ 5 Years
MSB	Corporate Communications / Former Digital Channels Team Leader at a German automotive manufacturer	German engine manufacturer	+ 10 Years
JRM	Product Strategy & Product Communications	German automotive manufacturer	+ 30 Years
PBH	Communication Professor and Consultant / former Communication Strategist of a German automotive manufacturer	University of Hohenheim	+20 Years
ASA	Marketing & Corporate Communications	Audi AG (Portugal)	+ 20 Years
Philipp Perwanger	Director / Corporate Communication Consultant with a focus on the automotive sector	Brunswick Group	+ 15 Years
DSM	Corporate Communication & Public Relations	Mercedes-Benz (Portugal)	+ 5 Years
FHP	Head of Innovation / Corporate Communication		+ 5 Years

	Consultant with a focus on the automotive sector	Communication consultancy	
HBV	Communications Consultant / Group Spokesperson	Volkswagen Group	+ 30 Years

Note. Own presentation based on the answers in the declaration of consent and personal information obtained through the interviews or research.

3.5.2. Structure of the interview script

Five thematic blocks emerged based on the research question, research objectives and the literature research carried out: *implementation transparency, corporate reputation, production information, corporate social responsibility, positive effects, and future challenges*. Depending on the interviewee, there was only limited time available (a few interviewees gave a time slot of only 30 minutes for an interview). Therefore, after the main questions, two additional questions were asked if there was still time left. Thematically, they give a glimpse into the future of communications. Moreover, the last possible question is also intended to generate input for finding our definition of digital corporate communication. The sequence of questions could also vary depending on the course of the interview, so the last questions were sometimes asked at the beginning.

Each interview contained 6 to 8 questions aimed to answer the research question and also to achieve the objectives. Therefore, the first question served as an introduction to the general topic of transparency, similar to the research question. It also provided an opportunity to find out what kind of social networks are being used and the importance attached that the interviewees attach to them regarding transparency. The second question has a connection to corporate reputation and the objective of interview question three was to understand their perspective on how sharing product information influences perceptions of transparency, while question four aimed at getting feedback about the publication of CSR reports. Thus, both questions could help answer the research objectives one and two.

Interviews provide the big advantage of gathering valuable insights from experts. In this study, where experts were drawn from both the communication field and the automotive industry, inquiries were made regarding potential benefits and future challenges associated with transparent digital communication. If there was still enough time, additional questions about current and future trends were asked. Moreover, as there is no precise definition of “transparency in digital corporate communication” in research, there was a great interest in knowing how the experts would define it. In the results section, an attempt will be made to

form a coherent definition based on keywords provided by the experts. The exact operationalization of interview guideline can be found in appendix F.

As previously described, the interviews were conducted not only with communication experts currently employed in the German automotive industry, but also with communication consultants within the industry, former communication managers from the automotive sector, and corporate communication specialists working for German automotive companies in different locations, such as Portugal. Consequently, four different versions of the interview script were created. One version for communication experts currently working in the automotive industry, another for experienced professionals in the automotive industry but are no longer employed there, a third for communication consultants in the automotive industry, and the fourth for two communication managers representing German automotive companies based in Portugal.

All interview guidelines versions are therefore adapted to their specific employment situation and can be found in appendix G. As some of the interviewees felt more comfortable in German and to support the quality of the answers, the respective questionnaire was translated into German for four people. Figure 5 in appendix G shows the German version. The transcripts of these interviews were subsequently translated into English by the researcher.

Before the first actual interview, a pre-test was conducted with one person. The comprehensibility of the questions was hereby assessed, leading to minor adjustments aimed at emphasizing individual words and simplifying the questions. For data protection reasons, a consent form was sent to the interviewees before each interview, which they had to send back signed (see appendix H). With this, they confirmed the use of their statements for the research purpose of this thesis. They also had four different anonymization options. Here they were allowed to choose whether their data should be anonymized completely, or which part of their personal information may be disclosed. Unfortunately, most of them chose to be partly anonymized as can be seen in table 3.

3.5.3. Qualitative data analysis procedures

Since most of the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, most transcripts were automatically made. The interview, which was conducted over the phone, was recorded with a second device and then transcribed using TurboScribe software. However, they all needed to be checked and corrected manually. All of the interviews that were conducted in German

were translated into English by the interviewer. Inconsistencies, technical interruptions and repetitions of words were adjusted. The greeting and farewell between the interviewer and interviewee were not transcribed. Further, only what was approved during the interview was reproduced in the transcripts, which also means that there may be gaps in the transcript but were marked.

A qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2000) was chosen for the evaluation of the interviews, which aims to analyze "any kind of fixed communication (interview transcripts, documents, video tapes,...)" (p. 2). You can choose between inductive and deductive categorization. However, the researcher can also decide to combine both approaches, and this was the option chosen for this study, as can be seen in appendix I (Mayring & Fenzl, 2014). Moreover, categories are derived both theoretically using deductive category application approach and from the available data itself, aiming to formulate them as closely as possible to the material at hand while searching for themes and carefully reviewing them. In the structuring process, a categorization system was developed to simplify the analysis based on Mayring (2000). The content analysis resulted in a total of 114 codes, which are divided into 12 main categories. The evaluation of the present study was conducted using the MaxQDA program.

The 12 main deductive categories derived from the theory and interview guideline in this study are shown in Table 4. Concerning the definition, particular attention was paid to certain terms already mentioned in the definitions by Rawlins (2009) Luoma-aho & Badham (2023) and Taiminen (2015).

A detailed overview of all the codes including the individual subcategories with the indication of the used qualitative content analysis approach, coding rules, definitions and text examples can be found in appendix J. According to Mayring (2000) this serves to make the coding process more comprehensible.

Table 4: *Overview main deductive categories*

DEDUCTIVE CATEGORIES	RESEARCH OBJECTIVES / RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS	THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
C1 Implementation of transparency in digital corporate communication	RESEARCH QUESTION	Vaccaro and Madsen (2006), Wong et al. (2021), Borden & Zhang (2023), Fombrun (2004), Jahansoozi (2006), Kim & Lee, 2018, Men & Hung-Baesecke (2015), Rawlins (2008)
C2 Importance of transparency in digital corporate communication	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1	Gomez-Vasquez, L., & Soto-Vélez, I. (2011), Unmetric (2019), Hofstätter et al. (2020), Infosys (2018), Svobodová et al. (2019)
C3 Digital corporate communication channels	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2 & 3	Baesecke (2015), DiStaso & Bortree (2012), Eck (2012), Fombrun & Foss (2001)
C4 Company reputation	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1	Cornelissen (2020), Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames (2019), Ko et al. (2018), Sodhi & Tang (2019), Xu et al. (2022)
C5 Indication of product information	RESEARCH QUESTION	Global Reporting Initiative (2023)
C6 Publication of CSR reports	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1	(Holland et al., 2018),
C7 Perceived transparency	RESEARCH QUESTION	ARD-ZDF Mass Communication Trends Study (2023), Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies (2023), Zerfaß et al. (2019)
C8 Digital communication trends	RESEARCH QUESTION + RESEARCH QUESTION 2	RESEARCH QUESTION
C9 Positive effects of transparency	RESEARCH QUESTION	Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies, 2023
C10 Future perspectives	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2	Christensen and Cornelissen (2015), Thøger Christensen (2002), Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2016)
C11 Critical view of transparency	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2	Rawlins (2009); Luoma-aho & Badham (2023), Taiminen (2015)
C12 Definition of transparency in digital corporate communication	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2	

Note. Own illustration.

3.6. Ethical research and other considerations

“Researchers have a duty to treat the people they study ethically and respectfully” (Emanuel et al., 2016, p. 513). When designing this mixed-methods study, the ethical principles presented in Emanuel et al.’s (2016) study were respected. Therefore, this study has a social value and is expected to find scientifically important information.

Moreover, participation is voluntary. This was queried in the questionnaire at the beginning, as well as from the completion of the consent form by the interviewees even before the pretest. Another very important aspect is that there are not going to be any health or mental risks for the study participants. In addition, the questionnaire in the Qualtrics survey portal was set up so that the participants were distributed equally between the two experimental conditions. This ensures that potential confounding variables are also distributed equally across the different test groups.

To give disclosure, every participant will be informed about the details of the study at the end of the survey and all interviewees debriefed at the end of the interviews. Moreover, it will be ensured that participant's data will be anonymously analyzed (Brosius et al., 2016, Emanuel et al., 2016). In particular, when dealing with what the interviewees said, their will was taken into account as to exactly what private information should be anonymized.

For the study to be of high quality, the instruments used, i.e. both the questionnaire and the interview script must meet the quality criteria and thus be objective, reliable, and valid. To ensure objectivity, care was taken to ensure that the questionnaire was standardized and mostly contained closed questions. As the data transformation was presented transparently, it can also be assumed that the evaluation is objective (Hussy et al., 2013; Rammstedt, 2004). Another important criterion that is fulfilled by the experimental online survey is the "automatability and thus partially high objectivity" (Brandenburg & Thielsch, 2009, p. 70), as for example, no experimenter effects can occur. Reliability is given if the measurement is reliable and provides the same or a similar result when repeated (Brosius, 2016). This is therefore used to check the stability or consistency of the answers. In quantitative research, reliability is primarily tested by checking whether the scores of the items of an instrument are internally consistent (Creswell, 2009). Statistically speaking, the Cronbach's alpha test is used for this purpose. The Cronbach's alpha values for the scales used (both from the pretest data and with the actual survey data) were therefore calculated using SPSS. As mentioned before, the evaluation showed that they exhibited good internal consistency. In addition, the validity was checked to see whether the empirical measurement measured what was intended to be measured (Brosius, 2016). In quantitative research, validity thus "refers to whether one can draw meaningful and useful inferences from scores on particular instruments" (Creswell, 2009, p.219). To ensure this to a certain extent, only scales were used in the questionnaire that had also been used in other previous studies (Brosius, 2016). The participants answered the questions privately on their own devices and not in front of a researcher in a laboratory. The experimental online survey can therefore be characterized by being externally valid since it will help draw conclusions about other people (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, possible examiner effects are going to be avoided, such as the problem of social desirability, which often occurs when researchers are interviewing participants personally and they "choose responses they believe are more socially desirable or

acceptable” (Grimm, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, precautions were also taken to avoid this effect during the interviews conducted for this study.

Besides the survey being conducted online, it is still an experiment, hence it also increases the possibility to measure intended variables within a controlled environment. This control is facilitated by the possibility of randomization of the participant groups. All of this therefore also results in high internal validity which also ensures the reliability of the results and enables researchers to draw correct conclusions from the data (Creswell, 2009; Mize, 2019). Accordingly, this method offers the advantages of both online surveys and experiments (Schnabel, 2021).

The quality criteria mentioned for quantitative research, such as objectivity, reliability, and validity, cannot be applied one-to-one for qualitative research. Therefore, there are certain qualitative quality criteria that must and were particularly observed in the qualitative analysis.

What must therefore be guaranteed is "procedural documentation, regularity, intercoder reliability, communicative validation, and the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis steps" (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2022, p. 148). The complete documentation of the research process in the qualitative survey procedure is given, which therefore fulfills the requirement for procedural documentation. Then, when observing procedural rules, qualitative research must be open to change, while also remaining systematic and comprehensible. For this reason, attention was paid by implementing a step-by-step procedure, the definition of material units and precise evaluation methods (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2022). Further, Brosius et al. (2016) state that the reliability of the content analysis can be maintained if "a satisfactory inter- and intracoder reliability can be established, i.e. the coders almost always make the same codes" (p. 169). This was partially ensured by having the researcher himself coding the material again after a few weeks and comparing it with each other. Furthermore, the coding of the transcripts was made as transparent as possible. All materials that were created or used for this can be consulted in more detail in the appendix I and appendix J. The communicative validation of the results takes place through feedback and discussion with the research participants. This was ensured in this study by the consent form between researchers and interview partners. Moreover, when interpreting the results, existing theoretical models must also be taken into account and a comparison made with similar studies must be made. This point was also ensured by making a comparison

with both qualitative and quantitative studies and models. By choosing a mixed-method approach and applying the concurrent triangulation strategy, the subject matter to be investigated is viewed from two different perspectives, thus also ensuring the requirement of a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis steps (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2022).

4. Results

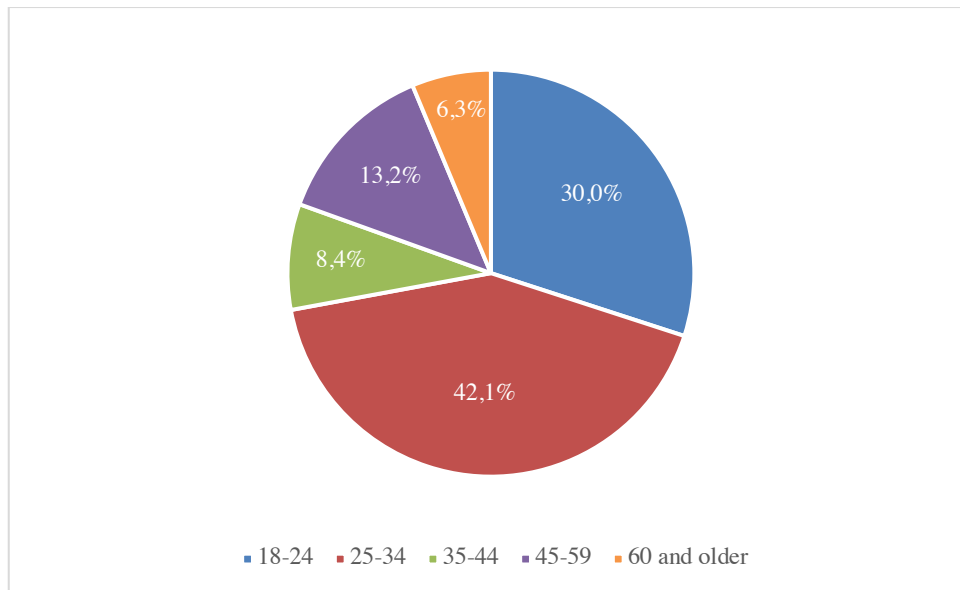
The results of the qualitative content analysis of the interview data are described and presented below. This first subchapter presents the results of the experimental survey, both univariate and bivariate, using statistical parameters and also tables to graphically display the results. The following summary of the qualitative results will be based on the overarching themes of the script and the deductive main categories derived from it. Relevant quotes from the participants support the statements. The quotations are presented with their position in the transcript so that the context can also be easily looked up in appendix K, where all transcripts are available.

4.1. Quantitative Survey Results

4.1.1. *Description of the survey participants*

As previously mentioned, a total of 190 fully completed questionnaires was evaluated. Thus, the calculated sample size of at least 385 people was not achieved. However, only a minimum sample size of 50 participants per group is required to perform the statistical tests to detect differences between groups and obtain sufficient power (Voorhis & Morgan, 2007). In this study this criterium was met since 100 participants were assigned to the experimental group and 90 participants were assigned to the control group. The average age group of the participants was between 25 and 34. Table Figure 10 shows the exact frequency distribution of the age groups of the participants. On average, participants took around 16 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

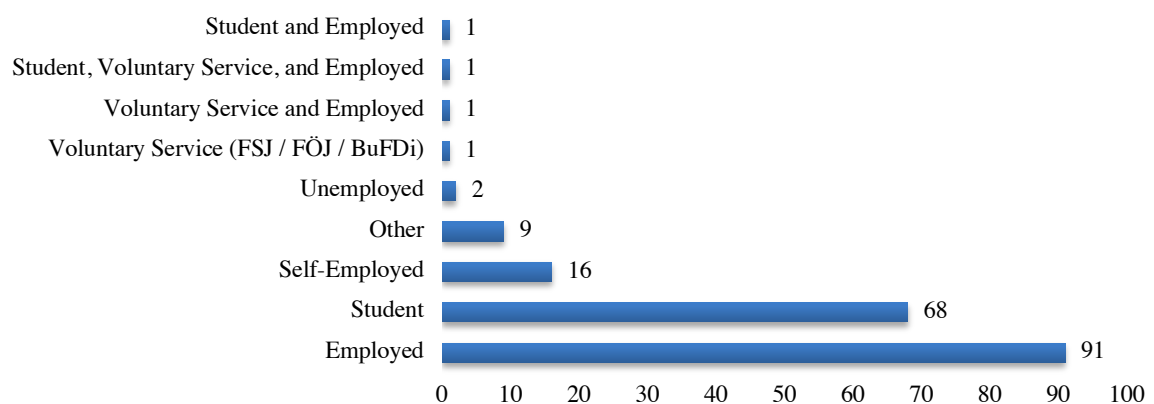
Figure 9: Age distribution of participants



Note. $N=190$. Question: "How old are you?"

Further, 66% ($n = 125$) stated that they were female and 33% ($n = 62$) that they were male. Two people preferred not to share their gender and one person stated that they are non-binary. The majority of participants were employed ($n=91$) or students ($n= 68$). 16 participants were self-employed and one person was currently working as a volunteer. Only two participants reported being unemployed. Some participants indicated more than one occupation, which can be seen in the combined categories in table 5. Only one person stated in the open text field that they were retired.

Table 5: Distribution of the selected occupation



Note. $N= 190$. Question: "What is your current occupation? Multiple choices are possible here."

4.1.2. Hypothesis testing

The first hypothesis proposes that automotive companies that share product information in their digital corporate communications are perceived as more transparent than those that do not. It is therefore a directed difference hypothesis. In this experiment, both groups saw an Instagram post. As described before, while the control group received hardly any information about the new car and the automotive company, the experimental group got an Instagram post with product and company information. A t-test for independent samples was therefore carried out to compare the difference between the control group and the experimental group in which the perceived transparency after viewing the Instagram post was compared. The variables, “*EG_Transparency*” and “*CG_Transparency*” were combined into “*Transparencyperception_after_Instagram*”.

The variable “*Transparencyperception_after_Instagram*” was the average between the answer options “somewhat disagree” and “neither agree nor disagree” ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.63$) on a 5-point Likert scale. Whereby the selection option “neither agree nor disagree” was the mode of this variable and therefore selected most frequently.

A number of requirements must be met for the chosen statistic test. Firstly, the groups must be independent so that none of the participants from one group appears in another group. This is fulfilled in this study. Then the criterion is met that the dependent variable is at least interval-scaled and the independent variable is nominally scaled. SPSS was also used to check whether there were any outliers in the data, which could be negated. Then both groups should be normally distributed, which was also the case. The last condition that was checked was the variance values, which should be approximately the same in each group. This was also confirmed (Hemmerich, n.d.-f). The t-test showed that, after seeing the Instagram stimuli, the experimental group ($M = 3.0$; $SD = 0.62$) has a higher perception level of the organizational transparency than the control group ($M = 2.8$; $SD = 0.63$). The difference is very small, however it can still be interpreted. It should be noted that the experimental, thus, tended to the “Neither agree or disagree” point of the scale. The control group, on the other hand, tended to “Somewhat disagree”. Further, the difference between the experimental and control group is statistically significant ($t(188) = 2.8$; $p < .05$). Hypothesis 1 can therefore be accepted (Hemmerich, n.d.-d).

The second hypothesis states that the publication of CSR reports on the websites of automotive companies is positively linked with a high-level perception of transparency

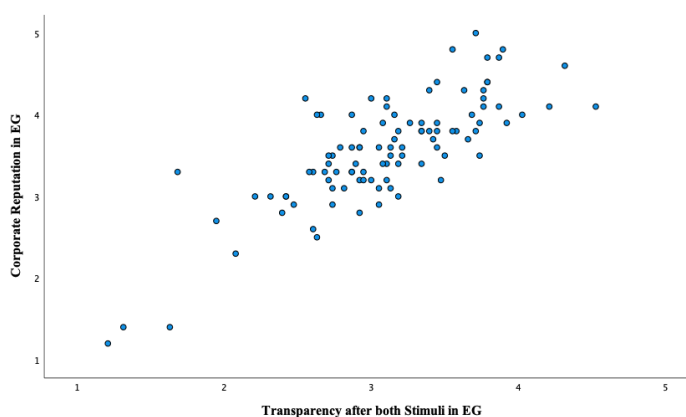
compared to companies that do not publish CSR reports. This hypothesis is therefore a directional difference hypothesis. The participants of this study were all shown a website of a automotive company. However, while the experimental group could read that a CSR Report was ready to be downloaded, the stimuli in the control groups lacked this information. Another t-test for independent samples was carried out, with the goal of comparing both groups. Similar to hypothesis 1, the variables “*EGWeb_Transparency*” and “*CGWeb_Transparency*” were combined to form the dependent variable “*Transparencyperception_after_Website*”. The perception of transparency after viewing the website was, on average, higher than after seeing the instagram post ($M = 3.2, SD = 0.65$). However, the option “Neither agree nor disagree” ($Mo = 3$) was still the most selected scale point. Further, all criteria needed to be checked out before starting the analysis, as explained previously. As the present data set contains only slight outliers, the decision was made not to exclude any cases and thus to analyze all cases. According to the Shapiro-Wilk test, the experimental group was not normally distributed ($p < .001$) but the control group was ($p = .05$). However, the t-test is considered robust to this violation and since our sample size is larger than 30 in both groups, no further data transformations were performed (Hemmerich, n.d.-f). The comparison shows that the experimental group ($M = 3.2; SD = 0.68$) does not perceive greater organizational transparency than the control group ($M = 3.2; SD = 0.62$). Further, there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control group ($t(188) = 0.38; p > .05$). The second hypothesis can therefore be rejected (Hemmerich, n.d.-e).

The third hypothesis assumes that a high transparency level of digital corporate communication has a positive impact on the corporate reputation perceived by consumers of German automotive companies. This counts as a directed correlation hypothesis. In this case, however, what will be examined is the transparency perceptions after each stimuli in the experimental group, since they received stimuli with a high transparency level and the queried corporate reputation in the experimental group. The perception of transparency after each stimulus was transformed into a single variable, resulting in the variable “*Transparency_EG*” ($M = 3.1; SD = 0.60$), which was used as an independent variable. Then, “*CorporateReputation_EG*” ($M = 3.6; SD = 0.67$), was used as a dependet variable. To get a first impression and to see the relationship between the variables graphically, a scatter diagram was created. The scatter diagram shows a positive correlation between the variables.

It therefore appears visually that the more transparent the respondents perceived digital corporate communication to be, the better they also rated the reputation of the fictitious company. Figure 11 shows this visualisation. For this evaluation, the choice was made to calculate a correlation coefficient, as this measures the strength and direction of the linear relationship between variables. Since the scale levels of both variables is ordinal, the Spearman correlation was calculated (Hemmerich, n.d.-c). The test showed that the perceived transparency after both stimuli in the experimental group correlated strongly. There was a strong positive and statistically significant correlation $r(100) = .73; p < .001$ (one-sided) since it was over .10 (Hemmerich, n.d.-d). Following this analysis, a further t-test for independent samples was also conducted to test whether there was a significant difference in the perceived corporate reputation between the experimental and control groups. For this purpose, the variable "CorporateReputation" was created from the variables "Corporate_Reputation_EG" and "Corporate_Reputation_CG". The explorative data analysis step shows that there are only three slight outliers. The Shapiro-Wilk test showed that only the control groups were normally distributed ($p < .001$). However, since we also have a sample size of $n > 30$ for the experimental group, we can again assume a normally distributed sample distribution here (Hemmerich, n.d.-f). The comparison shows that the experimental group ($M = 3.6; SD = 0.67$) does have a very small higher corporate reputation perception than the control group ($M = 3.5; SD = 0.59$). However, there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control group ($t(188) = .11; p > .001$).

This means that the third hypothesis can only be accepted to a limited extent (Hemmerich, n.d.-e).

Figure 10: Scatter diagram for hypothesis test 3



Note. $N=100$. Scatter diagram of the correlation between corporate reputation and transparency in the experimental group.

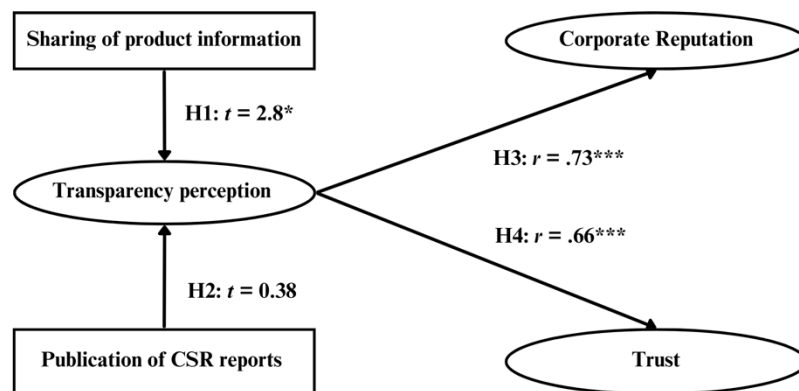
To investigate the fourth and final hypothesis, which proposes a direct connection between transparency perception and trust, the descriptive statistics of the variables “*Trust_All*” from the survey of trust in the experimental and control group and “*Transparency_All*” which consists of the perception of transparency surveyed after each stimuli in both groups, were examined first. It was clear that the overall perception of transparency ($M = 3.0, SD = 0.58$) and trust ($M = 3.0, SD = 0.60$) in both groups was rather neutral. Table 6 shows further descriptive statistics of these two variables and the other variables used so far. Before the statistical analysis, the possible correlations between the ordinal variables were checked visually. A scatter plot was again used for this. This showed a tendency towards the middle and a very slight correlation between a high perception of transparency and a high level of trust. Again, the Spearman correlation was calculated. The test showed that the perceived transparency in both groups correlated strongly with the level of trust. Moreover, this correlation was positive and statistically significant $r(190) = .66; p < .001$ (one-sided). With this result, the fourth hypothesis can therefore be temporary accepted (Hemmerich, n.d.-d). Since this test only examines a connection of the variables and does not test any difference about the control and experimental groups, another t-test was also carried out. The exploratory data analysis also showed few data outliers here, which is why all cases were retained for analysis. In addition, the data is also normally distributed. The descriptive statistics of the distribution in the two groups already show that there is no real difference between the experimental group ($M = 3.0, SD = 0.06$) and control group ($M = 3.0, SD = 0.60$). The implementation of the t-test also showed that the difference between the two groups is not significant ($t(188) = .12; p > .001$) (Hemmerich, n.d.-e).

Table 6: *Descriptive statistics of the variables*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Trust_All	190	1	5	2.98	0.60
Transparency_All	190	1	5	3.03	0.58
Transparencyperception_after_Instagram	190	1	4	2.89	0.63
Transparencyperception_after_Website	190	1	5	3.16	0.65
CorporateReputation	190	1	5	3.56	0.63
Transparency_EG	100	1	5	3.10	0.60
CorporateReputation_EG	100	3	5	3.56	0.67

Furthermore, in Figure 12, the previously presented visualization of the hypotheses was supplemented with the main statistical results. It can therefore also be inferred from the figure that the first, third and fourth hypotheses could be accepted. However, as the supplementary statistical tests made clear, a few points need to be taken into account here. These will be examined in more detail in the discussion section.

Figure 11: *Proposed hypothesis model with statistical results*



Note. Own illustration. Proposed hypothesis model with the values of the correlation coefficient r and t -values.

* $p < .05$

*** $p < .001$ (one-sided).

4.2. Qualitative Interview results

4.2.1. Demographics

Table 3 already showed an overview of the most important information about the interviewees, including their job position or area of expertise, as well as their current company and their years of work experience. This information is further elaborated in appendix L. Looking at the demographic data, it should be noted that, of the 10 interviewees, 8 disclosed their ages. The average age of these participants was 41. The two people for whom the age indication is missing have both provided information that they have over 30 years of experience in the automotive industry and communications. Furthermore, among the interviewees, 8 were men and 2 were women. Except for the two people who work for Audi and Mercedes-Benz in Portugal, all participants have Germany as their primary residence.

4.2.2. Main categories

4.2.2.1. Implementation of Transparency

Most interviews began with questions about the implementation of transparency in the corporate communications of German automotive companies.

PHB, for example, emphasized the importance of the need to have a blended approach to communication, by incorporating both digital and human interaction at every touchpoint in the stakeholder journey. He believes that true transparency is not just about making information easily available, but also about actively revealing and communicating the company's actions, motivations, and methods. This strong transparency promotes trust, which he believes is essential.

On the other side, Alexandra Landers emphasizes the need to share information fast on social media and give “your target groups the same of information at the same time” (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 10). For this purpose, BMW Group uses the “Press Club” platform, on which e.g press releases are published. Each country has its own press club, where local colleagues can translate the information and therefore share it with their respective media and target groups. Smaller countries without their own press clubs are directed to the global press club, where information is always available in English. In her opinion, this ensures a consistent communication approach and can therefore be seen as one of BMWs “main transparency tools” (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 12). MSB also states that “Social media is also a way for more transparency and dialogue as well” (MSB, Pos. 12).

FHB connects these views of information dissemination and social media usage by saying that "automotive companies should focus on open and honest communication, stakeholder engagement, and ethical practices. Regular updates and clear messaging across digital platforms can build trust. Then, interactive platforms encourage feedback and discussion, while clear privacy policies and proactive crisis management improve accountability." (Pos. 28). Additionally, he also states that "detailed product information, transparent pricing, and supply chain transparency are further evidence of ethical practices. Streamlining these efforts ensures a consistent and transparent approach across digital communications." (FHP, Pos.28).

This detailed company and product information is often communicated through the regular publication of reports. DSM addresses exactly this. She explains that Mercedes-Benz, for example, communicates different results, such as sales results, every trimester and

that this publication is part of its commitment to transparency. In general, automotive companies should publish what they are doing and provide evidence in the form of figures and numbers, while doing that. This view is also shared by MSB and ASA. ASA elaborates it as follows; “and this is something that it is already done within the company and more and more it will be done for the future and all of these messages we are completely transparent and not just saying, oh, we are going green, but we're not showing what we are doing, and this is what we do with these reports. We try to show what is the path.” (Pos. 57).

What was also often emphasized was the importance of showing the purpose and mission to achieve transparency, “because transparency initially arises from the fact that a company does not close itself off, but participates in the digital world, so to speak, opens itself up, shows things and tells what this company is all about” (PHB, Pos. 21). ASA also states, “so this transparency chapter, it's really important in my point of view, because it just really opens up a whole new world for companies to develop, to show a lot of their purpose, a lot of the mission that they have” (ASA, Pos. 21).

In addition, several interviewees noted that to implement transparency, departments must work together internally, so that knowledge is not lost but instead shared: “I believe that the best solution from my point of view is for corporate communications to have an extremely broad base within the company. It has to think strategically about all these risks and risk factors and it therefore has to dock onto all these departments.” (Philipp Perwanger, Pos. 28).

Other findings were that transparency often depends on the fact that the individual employer within an organization wants to be transparent (JRM). In addition, with increasing regulations, automotive companies need to take responsibility regardless of geographical boundaries. It is also made clear that despite all the challenges, companies should try to prioritize open communication and ethical behavior (ASA; FHB; MSB). The emphasis on morality and responsibility is therefore essential in transparent digital corporate communications for automotive companies (ASA; FHB; MSB; JRM).

4.2.2.2. Corporate Reputation and Transparency Perception

When asked about how transparency is associated with corporate reputation and whether it can be assumed that it always has a positive influence, different opinions emerged during the ten interviews.

SSB has a critical view because although he states that transparency should always be present, it does not necessarily lead to building a reputation. Instead, he highlights how the lack of transparency could be perceived negatively. ASA shares a similar opinion; “I would like to see it as positive. Everything that we do, we are not doing to jeopardize the company reputation, everything that we do is trying to get the most out of a clear, transparent, and original image. But like I said, it is always a risk.” (ASA, Pos. 27). PHB also states a more careful view “In other words, transparency that can contribute to a good reputation or that is important for the good reputation of an automotive company, is a very fragile structure, just like the good reputation itself or the trust and digital corporate communication” (PHB, Pos. 27). MSB continues this and explains that transparency can also have negative effects on reputation; “Transparency means that everyone out there can learn more about your strong but also about your weak sides as well, and so transparency means and a really realistic view on the things and maybe there are things where companies used to hide away, and now they share their information (...)” (MSB, Pos. 17). Although Alexandra Landers first mentioned that transparency can have positive effects, especially in the current time of transformation towards e-mobility and sustainable solutions, she also says that “we also have to be prepared that perhaps the perception is not always positive” (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 24).

ASA, on the other hand, states that “in terms of reputation, at least today the main top companies in the world, they want to communicate transparently. They do it to have a good reputation and so that people can relate with these with these kind of companies.” (ASA, Pos. 55). The FHB also notes that a high level of transparency in digital corporate communications, “will positively influence a company's reputation by building trust and credibility with consumers and shareholders” (FHP, Pos. 40). Philipp Perwanger concludes at the end of his interview that “transparency in times of digital corporate communication increases the connection or bond between the public and the company, which means that a company becomes more approachable, more tangible and more understandable. And that in turn means that it benefits the company's reputation overall.” (Pos. 58). Interview partner HBV gives a concrete example of this. The automotive company he used to work for was involved in a major scandal, which was partly due to a lack of transparency. HBV believes that if the problem had been addressed openly from the start, with full disclosure of all known facts, the public perception would have been positive. Instead, the company seemed closed off.

4.2.2.3. Product information and transparency perception

PHB first highlights the changing automotive landscape and notes a shift from blind trust in brands to critical evaluation by consumers. He attributes this to the increasing demand for sustainability and fairness. Therefore, he notes that companies today navigate between profit maximization and social good and recognize that products are still at the core of their business. Therefore, it is important to focus on transparent and authentic communication, not only about products but also about company values. Essentially, companies must provide credible and transparent information on various aspects that go beyond the mere product; “In other words, you are playing on a completely different keyboard, where you have to provide credible, transparent information that goes far beyond the product.” (PHB, Pos. 38-39). FHB also confirms the importance of providing information, by saying that “providing information allows consumers to make informed decisions, demonstrates honesty, and showcases the company's commitment to safety and regulatory compliance.” (FHB, Pos.60).

However, almost all of the interviewees emphasize the complexity of publishing product information online. JRM stresses in particular that “when it comes to companies or complex issues such as supply chains, this is much more challenging.” (JRM, Pos. 8). MSB has a similar view, thus he makes it clear that “it depends on who you are asking the question. From a customer perspective. Yes, it is a positive thing, from the corporate perspective, it's full of risks and because especially when we're talking about the supply chain. Supply chain in the automotive industry is full of challenges I would say.” (MSB, Pos. 24). In this regard, Philipp Perwanger points out that the automotive company BMW takes a proactive approach by providing transparency about its suppliers and material consumption, especially concerning sustainability criteria. However, he also stresses that if problems do arise with a supplier, it can attract media attention and raise doubts about the company's ability. He therefore believes that it is important to manage the supply chain effectively. Alexandra Landers, who works for BMW, reflects on this approach by explaining that the company ensures that the supply chain is sustainable and complies with current legislation. However, HBV also points out that compliance with the Supply Chain Tracing Act, for example, is “something you can even come close to explaining to anyone on social media because it takes hours” (Pos.30).

Another point on this topic that has been repeatedly emphasized is the desire that the information must be transparent, authentic, credible, and valid. PHB therefore states that “we need credible, transparent product information that is not advertising, that is no longer real or if it was before, but that is credibly authentic” (Pos. 38). And SBB believes that that “the information has to be transparent as far as possible and of course it has to be valid” (SSB, Pos. 41).

What is also important to mention and was made clear by some interviewees is that in addition to the willingness to communicate transparently, the publication of certain information is mandatory. “So there are things that have to be there. For example, the consumption data” (SSB, Pos. 37). SBB pointed out right that there are now certain regulations on how product information should be handled on social media. Specifying consumption data is one of the simplest pieces of information. He also highlights that these guidelines are becoming increasingly precise. Further, SSB points out that above all providing detailed information serves to create transparency and also to address specific issues such as sustainability. He stresses the importance of transparent and valid information. However, he warns against overwhelming people with too many details. PHB also explains that “car manufacturers are obliged to provide a certain degree of transparency when it comes to product communication. That means that when they advertise their product and even when they do corporate communications about it, so if they are the CEO and they talk about the new VW Golf on LinkedIn, then I think they have to provide certain transparency information” (Pos.16). ASA also summarizes that these details are attributable to “with the European and the world regulations” (ASA, Pos. 41).

4.2.2.4. Corporate Social Responsibility and Transparency Perception

It becomes clear that all interviewees have a positive attitude towards Corporate Social Responsibility Reports. Further, all interviewees who currently work for an automobile company said that their company either has its own CSR report or that it is integrated into their annual report. The communications consultants also gave examples of German automobile companies and how they deal with the issue of Corporate Social Responsibility. For instance, Philipp Perwanger gives again an example of the company BMW; “I think BMW was one of the first to have its own sustainability report and they had their own communication function for sustainability and later, that was a few years ago and then they

started to merge the sustainability report with the annual report, which in my view also makes sense” (Pos. 32). Alexandra Landers goes on to point out that the report will only be published digitally “to reduce paper and every person can download it and have a look at it” (Pos.28). MSB also gives BMW as an example and speaks well of the integration of the CSR report into the annual report, since from the point of view of the interviewee “the key message behind is that sustainability is in the midst the company. It's nothing besides the company. It is in mid of the company” (MSB, Pos. 30).

He further explains that it is not only important to publish this on the company website without taking any further action; “they [BMW] translated it into a very hands-on and in a very in snackable content with lots of images and animations, videos and texts, that are written in a way that everyone can understand them and they published it via the corporate website. And fostered the communication via social media and so” (MSB, Pos. 30). The usage of Social media and in general the choice of a multichannel distribution to promote the CSR commitment was also suggested by Philipp Perwanger; “record lots of mini clips about this report, we're going to use them on Instagram and make infographics, then we're going to add the head of sustainability, who will then give a short interview on LinkedIn and so on and so forth, that means the proactive use of the results or the content of such a report on digital channels, analog channels, they go on the radio with it, so all sorts of things.” (Pos. 32). The website has often been mentioned as a platform for publishing the reports, but Philipp particularly points out that the accessibility of a report is crucial; “in other words, if you make this report and you leave it on the website under 5 and have to click 5 or 10 times until you get there, then no matter how transparent the report is, it has no significance at all for the perceived transparency.” (Philipp Perwanger, Pos. 32). Another point to consider in his opinion is the target group. Reports such as annual, sustainability, or CSR reports are mostly aimed at journalists, the capital market, etc., rather than consumers. Philipp Perwanger, therefore, argues that it is important to have “frequency of proactive communication” (Philipp Perwanger, Pos. 32). MSB also shares a similar statement; “On the first hand, I would say no one reads the corporate sustainability report because it is long, (...) but it's the source of truth and a very valuable source for further responsibility communications via social media, via press releases, via dialogues and so on.” (MSB, Pos. 28). HBV also supports the importance of communicating these reports and CSR correctly; “you can see that companies have understood what they have to do there and that they have

to communicate it properly” (Pos. 34). And as Philipp Perwanger concludes that “the report alone is far too passive to increase the perceived transparency of the company” (Pos.32).

JRM also notes there are reports that the automobile companies “have to deliver in terms of transparency” (Pos. 26). However, to fill them with correct information, the people who create these reports must have all the information available in a confidential manner. JRM sees this as a challenge since certain things are not disclosed internally either. HBV is also of the opinion that “companies make an extreme effort to do this and they also have to make an extreme effort, because the reports are all certified, are approved and are subject to EU guidelines, global guidelines and so on and so forth” (HBV, Pos. 32). MSB also addresses the fact that publishing this report is now mandatory while highlighting its importance; “So it's worth it and it's really worth it while you have to do this because the European regulations oblige the companies to publish this report and I would say it's worth it.” (Pos. 28).

However, one point that was raised by three different interview partners and must also be mentioned in this results section is “greenwashing”. As PHB acknowledges, the potential for companies to achieve positive results through transparent CSR practices is high but is also increasingly being met with skepticism in industries like the automotive. He highlights the issue of "greenwashing," where companies overstate or misrepresent sustainability efforts, diminishing confidence in CSR initiatives. He also goes so far as to make it clear that there are enough companies that do this specifically; “there are currently still enough black sheep who are demonstrably doing greenwashing sustainability communication” (PHB, Pos. 41). JRM even admits that the company he worked for was often more concerned “with finding the one that makes the company appear in the best light, without directly telling the untruth but also without directly telling the truth” (JRM, Pos. 22). HBV who worked at VW during the diesel scandal, also sees avoiding greenwashing as a complex challenge, when it comes to the publication of CSR reports; “However, you're quickly subject to this greenwashing label, which is very dangerous, you have to be very careful and not just pick out great examples, which then automatically lead to a greenwashing sticker, although they are certainly not meant that way by the companies, but that's just the danger.” (Pos. 35). To avoid greenwashing or to show how the company generally behaves in line with the values it communicates, SSB gives an example of exactly this approach. He explains how his company ran a social responsibility campaign on social media. Instead of just donating money, they decided to repurpose wood storage units from their cars and install them in

schools in South Africa, to help work against the issue of power cuts. They therefore provided a sustainable solution for schools, while still establishing “a corporate connection i.e. why are we doing this now and why is it good that we are doing this and why can we make a positive contribution?” (SSB, Pos. 61). While ASA also emphasizes the importance on their CSR reports, stating that they reflect Audi’s current path, particularly Audi’s focus on electrification. DSM also states that the reports are there to show what Mercedes is actually doing; “we need to show those people what we are doing and that we are effectively doing something not only taking around things” (DSM, Pos. 42).

Another thing that was mentioned is the need to see CSR as part of the corporate strategy. Alexandra Landers explains that “it’s not only about the product anymore, it’s a 360 degree approach from let’s say the strategy phase where we are already thinking about for example changing materials from let’s say leather seats to sustainable materials” (Pos.26). PHB also says that “CSR is a very important overall corporate, strategic issue nowadays and will have to be managed centrally and strategically in the future” (Pos. 45). It is also important to clarify responsibilities or is also executed in an “integrated manner with corporate communication, i.e. at eye level” (PHB, Pos.43). Especially if one views transparency as critically as JRM, who points out several times that transparency can otherwise also be used for this purpose “to delegate responsibility away from oneself so that someone else has it” (JRM, Pos. 38).

4.2.2.5. Digital corporate communication channels

“Social media can contribute to and support corporate communication or companies becoming transparent through their communication on these channels” (PHB, Pos. 21). As PHB points social media out as an important role in achieving transparency. When asked about digital corporate communication channels and especially about social media, the interviewees identified both positive and critical points. Social media is seen as being able to play a crucial role in corporate communication by fostering transparency however, it must be used with caution. Still, as Alexandra Landers makes clear, social networks are essential to reach the younger target group these days; “And for the public, and especially younger target groups like students, young professionals, well, who grew up with an iPhone and an iPad and quite lots of electronic devices, they are currently a lot on social media. So, you can’t negate that there is. There is no social media, you can just put aside.”

(Pos.16). Furthermore, the significance of social media is evident when considering the mentioned advantages. Social media is therefore characterized by the fact that it offers broad access to information and facilitates interaction between companies and interest groups. This promotes communication in both directions and enables valuable feedback. The wide reach of digital communication is also highlighted as a major advantage. Table 7 shows the most important quotes from the interviews on these benefits.

Table 7: *Overview of the benefits of social media with quotes*

Advantages of Social Media	Quotes from the interviewees
Transparency	<p>* "Social channels are probably even much, much more promising for such transparency due to their technical possibilities than perhaps other communication via press releases or something else" (Pos.21)</p> <p>* "So now the question is, what about transparency? This is a recurring theme, of course, social media can contribute to and support corporate communication or companies becoming transparent through their communication on these channels, because transparency initially arises from the fact that a company does not close itself off, but participates in the digital world, so to speak, opens itself up, shows things and tells what this company is all about. First of all, this creates a basic transparency, i.e. it does not close itself off to an open world." (PHB, Pos. 21)</p> <p>* "You have a completely different form of publicity and transparency than you used to have" (HBV, Pos. 22)</p> <p>* "I would say social media is a way for more transparency and dialogue as well" (MSB, Pos. 12)</p>
Access of information	<p>* "One of the things that we've seen with the Internet is that people can access a lot of information these days." (ASA, Pos. 21)</p> <p>* "So, you don't you don't have to wait for the monthly publication to be printed. You have it immediately on the road" (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 18)</p> <p>* "Because they are increasingly reaching more and more people via very specific communication, such as social media channels. No longer via the one big article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung that everyone read 20 years ago" (PHB, Pos. 21)</p>
Interaction	<p>* "I have a wide range of options for communicating the content of events via social channels, i.e. live events, infographics, images, films, texts, in other words the entire spectrum of content preparation is actually available to me in social media, including the equally important option of interaction."</p> <p>* "That's why we are on social media, to interact with our target groups." (SSB, Pos. 79)</p> <p>* "We are on a cross-industry journey here, meaning that we have a centralized, even more centralized communication channel for interacting with people and engaging in dialogue and exchange" (PHB, Pos. 21)</p>
Large online reach	<p>* "Because there are now 4.5 billion people who have Internet access. There is no other form of communication that reaches so far, into so many households with different income levels and across so many continents as digital communication." (JRM, Pos. 70)</p> <p>* "It's getting more and more important because the reach and is tremendous and they are also quite fast." (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 18)</p>
Feedback	<p>* "In contrast to pure sender communication, i.e. one-way communication, you always get direct feedback from your users" (SSB, Pos. 10)</p> <p>* "And also get some feedback out of out of what people really realize" (ASA, Pos. 21)"</p> <p>* "Social media are theoretically a very good thing, because they promote diversity of opinion, because they secure international opinions" (JRM, Pos. 54).</p>

Note. Own illustration.

According to SBB, Alexandra Landers, ASA, Philipp Perwanger and DSM the social media channels that automotive companies are currently using or that they recommend using are the following:

- Corporate Website
- LinkedIn

- Facebook
- Instagram
- X (formerly Twitter)
- YouTube

It should be mentioned here that half of the interviewees mentioned the company website as an important channel.

Moreover, Alexandra Landers also mentions own digital corporate channels like the Press Club that BMW maintains. Transparency within the company is equally important as noted by MSB, platforms like an “employee app or an Intranet with dialogue function and lots of dialogue formats within the company as well, while the board members are talking to or with the employees” (MSB, Pos. 15).

Further, FHP explains that when planning the digital corporate communication, the automotive companies should use a “combination of different channels. So, for example, the company website, social networks, but only those where active usage is authentic from the company's perspective. Like, in my opinion not everyone company has to use TikTok. But additionally, automotive companies should use press portals, blogs, and regularly keep email contact” (Pos. 32).

When analyzing the transcripts, it became evident that except for FHB, all interviews were also critical of social media. Critical points that can be drawn from the interviews were the following: It is important to find a balance in transparency, as too much information can be overwhelming (SSB). Social media presents challenges such as framing and the spread of disinformation; “The big problem with social media is framing, because a lot of disinformation takes place via social channels” (PHB, Pos. 21). In addition, negative feedback on social media can damage a company's reputation. For example, there is a very high risk of a shitstorm, where a negative focus disproportionately amplifies problems (DSM). Especially since on social media people “like to go to social media and to talk bad about everything” (DSM, Pos. 53). Every company should be aware that once information is online, it is permanently public, and the company *cannot hide* away anymore so easily (ASA; HBV; MSB; Philipp Perwanger). So as HBV says; “Once it's done, it's out there” (HBV, Pos. 17). ASA further elaborates on the same topic by saying that “So when you have this amount of information available to everybody, you really it's not that companies are

hiding, but you can't hide anymore. Everything is out there, so you need to be more and more transparent towards your public.” (Pos.21).

4.2.2.6. *Positive effects of transparency in digital communication*

Six out of ten interviewees mentioned *trust* as a positive effect of transparency. DSM has also cited trust as important factor to consider with regard to transparency in Corporate Social Responsibility.

Credibility also came up as a positive impact of transparency. After SBB gives the example of transparency being implemented, he also notes that this is “also more credible and better than simply saying yes, we'll build you a school building now because we need something for our proof of donation” (SSB, Pos. 59).

A *good reputation* was also mentioned several times (often in connection with trust), regardless of the question on corporate reputation.

According to a few interviewees transparency can also provide *orientation and a sense of security*. JRM also sees transparency as a possible instrument for creating security, but he uses the word “supposed” and allows therefore a critical view to take effect; “I'm just much more aware of how much more complicated it is in complex systems and that transparency could be used to create supposed security” (JRM, Pos. 38).

Moreover, possible corporate *success* is also identified as a potential outcome. PHB even goes so far as to say that transparency is “a survival construct for successful companies in the digital cosmos” (PHB, Pos. 16). MSB also explains that through transparent communication, especially in employer branding, people could perceive the company as a more attractive employer, as this would enable them “to get the whole truth and say ohh wow that's a interesting company and it fits to my personal way of thinking or living” (MSB, Pos. 20)”. Philipp Perwanger also states that “the fight for talent in competition” (Pos. 19) is necessary.

Further, DSM and Philipp Perwanger are share the opinion that transparency in digital corporate communication brings added *value* to the automotive company. Table 8 shows an overview of the positive effects just mentioned and backs them up with the most important quotes.

Loyalty also came up as a positive aspect of transparency. As FHB puts it; “This openness reassures consumers that the company is reliable and ethical, leading to increased

loyalty and positive word-of-mouth” (Pos. 60). Another positive effect once mentioned, is the possibility of *crisis management*, which was highlighted by FHP; "transparent communication can lead to informed decision making and another positive effect or reason would be that it can be used for crisis management” (FHP, Pos. 64).

Table 8: *Overview of the main positive effects of transparency with quotes*

Main positive effects	Quotes from the interviewees
Trust	<p>* “And transparency is a very important building block for building or expanding such centrally important constructs such as trust, reputation, etc., which are important for people. (PHB, Pos. 16)”</p> <p>* "And transparency is a very important building block for building or expanding such centrally important constructs such as trust, reputation, etc., which are important for people.” (PHB, Pos. 16)</p> <p>* “I think if we [Audi] are creative and an inspiring brand, we can bring a lot of trust regarding the work we are doing.” (ASA, Pos. 62)</p> <p>* "transparency leads to more trust and trust is the most valuable currency” (MSB, Pos. 17)</p>
Credibility	<p>* “So I think in case of doubt, transparent corporate communication increases credibility.” (Philipp Perwanger, Pos. 40).</p> <p>* “So the need is high transparency in digital corporate communication. If that is given, it will positively influence a company's reputation by building trust and credibility with consumers and shareholders” (FHP, Pos. 40).</p>
Good Reputation	<p>*"Further, transparency also helps mitigate the impact of negative events, as consumers are more likely to forgive mistakes if they believe the company is being forthright and responsible” (FHP, Pos. 48)</p> <p>* "And transparency is a very important building block for building or expanding such centrally important constructs such as trust, reputation, etc." (PHB, Pos.16)</p> <p>* “transparency, from my point of view at least, fosters a positive reputation and also strengthens customer relationships” (FHP, Pos. 60)And transparency is a very important building block for building or expanding such centrally important constructs such as trust, reputation, etc.</p>
Orientation & Security	<p>*„On the other hand, I do believe that transparency also helps to ensure that the messages are better understood“ (SBB, Pos.65)</p> <p>* "transparency gives people orientation. It provides security and insights. Which is completely disappearing in our digital cosmos or in the digital world and that is why transparent digital corporate communication is a very big lever for corporate communication to generate a lot of positive things for the people" (PHB, Pos. 47)</p>
Success	<p>"So one thing is clear: nowadays, a company will no longer be successful in terms of communication, or will not be successful in the future, if its communication is not transparent, including its digital communication" (PHB, Pos.47)</p>
Company value	<p>*"I think it's important these days. I think it brings added value if you have digital corporate communications and thus automatically become more transparent" (Philipp Perwanger , Pos. 19)</p> <p>*"And one thing that we want, I think it's one of the things that we want the most, is that our brand becomes the most valuable and has the best perception in the market. So in that point of view, I think it helps a lot." (DSM, Pos. 44)</p>

Note. Own illustration.

4.2.2.7. *Critical view of transparency*

Critical aspects were mentioned not only concerning social media but also regarding transparency. The complexity of transparency and its implementation is particularly emphasized. Eight out of ten interviewees tried to explain this complexity.

SBB for example elaborates that some things are just too complicated to be communicated transparently because they would not be properly understood. While PHB also highlights, that some topics such as “sustainability issues are viewed and scrutinized very critically, especially in the automotive industry” (PHB, Pos. 41).

Further, the interviewee JRM mentioned some critical points that can be summarized under the concept of pseudo-transparency. In doing so, he clarifies that while transparency is good in theory, it is often more about optics than actual disclosure. It can therefore be used as a placebo rather than true openness; “And doesn't it often used as a placebo?” (JRM, Pos. 12) or “in very many cases, it was more about finding the one that makes the company appear in the best light, without directly telling the untruth but also without directly telling the truth” (JRM, Pos.22).

It is also pointed out that transparency is always in the eye of the beholder (PHB; JRM); “So transparency in digital corporate communication actually means different perspectives” (PHB, Pos.12).

Other challenges that were mentioned were

- *The required responsiveness*: “And then, real-time communication requires companies to respond quickly and efficiently to requests and specific situations. That can also be a challenge.” (FHB, Pos.68)
- *An information overload online*: “The huge amount of information [online] available leads to an overload of information.” (FHP, Pos. 68)
- *Possibility of becoming more vulnerable*: “Transparency means that everyone out there can learn more about your strong but also about your weak sides as well” (MSB, Pos.17)

The most frequently cited example of this complexity and challenge of transparency was the diesel gate scandal. And as HBV puts it “the diesel scandal took the issue of transparency to another level. Before that, one or two things may not have been completely opaque, let's say, but they weren't completely transparent.” (Pos. 16). Before explaining that “If the issue had been dealt more openly and publicly at a much earlier stage and all the facts,

that were of course known at time X, had been disclosed, it would certainly have been much easier, and the public would have gotten a much different picture.” (Pos.25). And as Philipp Perwanger also makes clear; “the diesel scandal was a tipping point (...) a game changer for the automotive industry, because the diesel scandal has led to an interest in things and thus also a demand for more transparency from the industry that was not there before” (Pos.34).

4.2.2.8. *Future challenges and perspectives*

When analyzing the transcripts regarding the future challenges and prospects of transparency in digital corporate communications, several key messages emerge that also provide more knowledge about transparency. ASA emphasizes the continued importance of personal communication, especially in industries like automotive, where real-world experience is crucial to fully understand the products; “So the physical contact, I am a big supporter for events. For example, since we are talking about the automotive industry, which is a huge industry, you can get a lot of great ideas for the websites, for experiences, for virtual tours, you can go into a car, you can even drive a car.” (ASA, Pos. 34). DSM is going in a similar direction and therefore sees more *events* in the future; “I see big, big conferences, big talks, big events with more than just some people from a company. I think it's not only about some important people from a company, but about all of the people that work in a company that need to show their point of view need to show what they do, what they like, what they dislike, what they really think about the company (DSM, Pos. 82).

MSB also highlights the importance of *human dialogue*; “The real dialogue between human beings, because we want communication that works between human beings, and this is the original way.” (MSB, Pos. 32).

Social media was mentioned by DSM as a particular challenge for the future and that it will not be the case that “in the future we can only use that has an information channel.” (DSM, Pos. 78). Instead, she suggests the usage of also more traditional media such as TV channels and newspapers, since in the opinion of the interviewee, this is the media that is still has “the verified information” (DSM, Pos. 79).

E-mobility was one of the most frequently mentioned challenges for the future for the automotive industry. In total, 4 of the 10 interviewees mentioned this; “the transformation from traditional drives to electromobility is creating a high need for investment, (...) we need very, very important transparency from companies” (PHB, Pos. 38). Alexandra Landers also states that “an automobile company aiming to transform the company to E-Mobility and

to have more sustainable approaches also within the company, also focusing more on electric cars, yes, we have to reach this public, and we have to use the positive effect of the digital age” (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 24).

Sustainability was also an often-mentioned challenge and at the same time a possibility by half of the interviewees with statements stating; “Sustainability will also become more important in the future and that is also a complex issue.” (SSB, Pos. 75). “So people are looking at this sustainability aspect, which means we have to become more transparent here too, because journalists, and therefore the public, are keeping a closer eye on how it influences purchasing decisions” (Philipp Perwanger, Pos. 37).

Transparency was also identified as an important aspect for the future; “So one thing is clear: nowadays, a company will no longer be successful in terms of communication, or will not be successful in the future, if its communication is not transparent, including its digital communication.” (PHB, Pos. 47). And as SBB says “dealing with transparency, as I said, it's always a question of how transparent can and do you want to be? But how you deal with it, the right way, will become increasingly important.” (Pos.75).

4.2.2.9. Digital corporate communication trends

The content analysis clearly showed that the trend currently perceived by most communication experts is “Artificial Intelligence” (AI). Seven of the ten interviewees thus named AI as a trend. Quotes from the transcripts that support this statement are for example from ASA; “Well, currently you see AI as the big trend.” (Pos.31), Alexandra Landers; “I think currently what we are often discussing is the role that artificial intelligence is playing.” (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 34) and from the communications expert MSB; “artificial intelligence. It is really turning everything around and I don't know exactly how what this pending image means, but it will turn everything around” (Pos. 32). However, although AI was the most frequently mentioned trend and many advantages were also mentioned, there are also some critical voices. Philipp Perwanger for example mentions the influence in “credibility and trust” (Pos.44), while HBV states that there is a “risk that topics are simply categorized incorrectly” (Pos.48). Alexandra Landers therefore makes it clear that companies “need some laws and regulations for the usage of artificial intelligence” (Pos. 36) and HBV also emphasizes that this topic “requires extreme attention” (Pos. 50).

Further, the dialogue between the automotive companies and the stakeholders was mentioned at various points in the various interviews. FHB specifically presents it as a trend; “Another trend would be the enhanced interactivity with consumers” (Pos. 72). Moreover, ASA also highlights that data privacy is also getting more attention from automotive companies, and similar to ASA; FHB also states, “that data privacy concerns are also a major challenge these days, as sensitive information must be protected while maintaining transparency” (Pos.68). Then, digitalization was also mentioned as a trend; “And another topic that I can already see is digitalization.” (SBB, Pos. 72).

4.2.2.10. Definition of transparency in the context of digital corporate communication

If time permitted, respondents were asked how they would define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication. Many different views crystallized here. Several statements were made on topics such as corporate identity, accessibility and disclosure of information, honesty, the relevance of transparency, the use of own channels, communication efforts, the need for openness, feedback and truth. Table 9 shows some of the main statements in connection with the identified key definition terms.

Table 9: *Overview of the main terms for a definition with the respective quotes +*

Key definition terms	Quotes from the interviewees
Reputation Management	"transparency has to be part of this basic interest of image cultivation and self-positioning of the company" (SSB, Pos. 87)
Accessibility	"transparency in digital corporate communication means providing clear, honest, and accessible information about company operations, decisions, and policies to all stakeholders." (FHP, Pos. 84)
Honesty	"one definition is the issue of openness and honesty (...) If we don't put this right at the top, then I don't think we'll be able to fill the concept of transparency with life" (HBV, Pos. 59)
Relevance	"Transparency is a key factor for successful digital communication." (MSB, Pos. 34)
Authenticity	"transparency in digital corporate communication is when the content and the way in which this content is communicated is authentic, relevant and true" (PHB, Pos. 49)
Own Channels	"digital corporate communication means transparent, authentic, professional communication work via your own channels and then especially, of course, via your own channels and not only in terms of quality, but also in terms of quantity, that you use them more than you have done so far" (PHB, Pos. 23)
Disclosure of information	"transparency is to get, let's say, the same information, out to the public at the same time, to all people." (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 50)
Communication efforts	"And the second thing, of course, is that I have to keep looking for every stakeholder journey, which, in addition to communicative touchpoints, also ensures contact between people, i.e. companies in the form of people, and the respective stakeholders" (PHB, Pos. 18)
Openness	"The way that you are communicating, you must be open." (ASA, Pos. 21)
Feedback	"we are empowering people to also give us feedback so we can be a better" (ASA, Pos. 71)
Truth	"I would say that transparency in this area of tension, so to speak, is to make maximum use of it, to come as close as possible to true, absolutely transparent communication" (SBB, Pos.87).

Note. Own illustration.

5. Discussion of Survey and Interview Results

In the following, the quantitative and qualitative results are discussed, primarily by comparing them with each other, with the aim of answering the research question and seeing whether the three research objectives can be achieved with the collected data. “This side-by-side integration is often seen in published mixed methods studies” (Creswell, 2009, p. 196), where the qualitative results and quotes help to either support or refute the quantitative results (Creswell, 2009).

The analysis of the sample, both for the survey and for the interviews, indicates that the average age of both respondents and interviewees falls within the age groups identified by the Allensbach market and advertising media analysis, as key demographics when it comes to buying high-quality or exclusive brands, including German cars (Lohmeier, 2024). This consistency suggests that both the opinions of interviewees (despite them being communication experts) and the perceptions of survey participants are highly relevant. It can therefore also be assumed that the results presented can help to plan communication strategies even more effectively.

The first research objective aimed at determining the importance of transparency in digital corporate communication for German automotive companies. Despite some uncertainties, three of the four hypotheses tested show the importance of high transparency in the digital corporate communication of automotive companies. When testing hypothesis 1, it became clear that the test group tended on average to have a neutral to positive transparency perception, while the control group tended to have a negative perception. The difference between the two groups was statistically significant and therefore suggests that the product and corporate information provided in digital communication does indeed have a positive influence on the perception of transparency, even if only very slightly. This result can therefore be interpreted as underlining the importance of disclosing more detailed information instead of “withholding” information and only sharing what is legally required on social media. In the literature research, it had become clear that transparency has a legal aspect, as certain regulations require the publication of certain data, such as the consumption figures on social media posts (Von Der Osten, 2019). Also, during the interviews, it became clear that sharing this information can show honesty and commitment. However, the focus should hereby always be on credible information.

Further, as shown in the literature review, corporate reputation is seen as a possible positive effect of transparent communication, which can also underline the importance of transparency. However, no absolute statement could be made either in the interviews or in the evaluation of the online survey. For example, although the quantitative analysis showed that there is a statistically significant correlation between transparency and corporate reputation, there was only a small difference between the control and experimental groups, which was not significant. However, by combining the two statistical analysis methods, the strength and direction of the correlation as well as the differences between the groups could be examined, and thus the hypothesis that a high level of transparency in digital corporate communication has a positive influence on the perceived corporate reputation can still be confirmed.

Further, transparency is also seen as necessary by interviewees, especially in digital communication, as they believe it can improve a company's image and increase the connection between public and companies. They argue that transparent communication makes companies appear more comprehensible, understandable and trustworthy, which can benefit a corporate reputation. However, the interviewees also emphasize that it does not always contribute directly to building a positive reputation, since transparency can also show vulnerabilities and potentially damage a company's reputation. An additional argument was that effective management of transparency, particularly in crisis situations, could improve public perception. Whereas a lack of it could potentially make a company appear secretive or untrustworthy. An example of the power of transparency or non-transparent communication on the reputation of a company, in this case VW, is the Dieselgate scandal. The scandal was often cited as an example of the complexities and challenges surrounding transparency. The main point here is that it can be seen as a turning point in the history of the automotive industry and also explains the increased demand for real transparency according to the interviews but also research. Studies such as Valentini & Kruckeberg (2018) show that stakeholder concerns have also increased as a result of the diesel scandal in relation to economic, legal and environmental issues. These complex issues pose a challenge, especially when it comes to transparent communication. However, it is even more important that companies not only address these issues, but also consider how they can be easily implemented and communicated in a simple and understandable way without withholding

important information or even conveying false information just to appear greener, more social or more transparent.

A well thought-out strategic corporate communication for the management of reputation is therefore more important than ever, which is also emphasized by various researchers such as Cornelissen (2020), Luoma-aho and Badham (2023) and Fombrun & Foss (2001).

In general, the interviewees also repeatedly commented on the importance of transparency in digital corporate communication. The statements particularly highlighted that transparency in the digital context is essential since digital communication can lack some indications which can be found in face-to-face communication. In their opinion, in addition to a good reputation, transparency could ensure also clarity and trust. Some of the literature presented above confirms these findings. Holland et al. (2018) therefore also note that non-transparent messages will not lead to clarity, while Kim and Lee (2018) see trust as a potential outcome of transparency, especially in combination with CSR communication, and Baesecke (2015), as well as Fombrun and Foss (2001), identify it as essential to build a good reputation. Looking at the results of hypothesis 4, which examined the effect of the different levels of transparency on the perception of trust in the fictitious automobile company, a one-sided correlation was evident, even if no statistically significant difference could be found between the two groups examined. This result can be interpreted to mean that there is a strong correlation between the perception of transparency and trust. Thus, disclosure of information does not necessarily enhance trust, but withholding information may diminish trust. This makes disclosure necessary, not to gain a benefit but to prevent losing it.

However, if one compares this with the statements in the interviews, despite the weak statistical results, one can still draw the conclusion that transparency is important for building trust. Nevertheless, building trust is challenging and requires significant effort. This challenge is also addressed in the report about the The Global PR and Communication Model 2021 and can be counteracted with its application (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management & Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership, 2021).

In addition to the before mentioned corporate reputation and trust, the interviewees also mentioned factors such as credibility, the feeling of security, success and a higher company value. Transparency is also mentioned as a necessary asset for managing crises. It is also

important to mention that these concepts are intertwined, they therefore influence each other. Credibility, for example, is often mentioned by scholars in connection with trust and also with the commitment to be transparent (Adeline et al., 2012; Pollach, 2005). Thøger Christensen (2002) had also noted the connection between transparency, credibility and good reputation and how these factors can lead to the success of companies. In summary, all of these positive effects demonstrate the importance of transparency, since without it, most of these assets cannot be achieved. Therefore, automotive companies will possibly not thrive without embracing transparency, particularly in digital communication.

The second research objective targeted the filling of the scientific gap about transparent digital communication of automotive companies. The interpretation of the first, third and fourth hypotheses has already shown the influence that transparent product and corporate communication has on perceived transparency, corporate reputation and trust. Now the interpretation of the second hypothesis turns out to be somewhat challenging. The second hypothesis suggested that CSR reports on the websites of automotive companies influence positively the perception of transparency. However, the analysis showed that having the information of the publication of a CSR report versus just the information about the topic CSR did not lead to a significant difference between the two groups. However, an interesting discovery was that the transparency level after seeing the Website, was higher than after seeing the Instagram post. This underlines the perception of the interview partners, that addressing the topic of CSR in general leads to transparency no matter if a CSR report can be downloaded or not. Further, looking at the results of the interviews, while most interviewees had a positive attitude towards CSR reports, some also suggested a more integrated approach, where the CSR report is part of the annual report. Moreover, from the interviewee perspective, it becomes therefore clear that it is important to address the topic of corporate social responsibility but that the trend is going into the direction of not having an extra report addressing all of it separately. All these findings thus confirm the need to communicate about CSR transparently and the increasing expectations of these topics presented in the literature section, while supplementing them with new ideas (Hoffhaus, 2011; Kaley, 2019; Kim & Lee, 2018). Rather, the focus should be on stakeholders finding all the important information they need in a simple and consolidated way, that is interesting for all target groups to read. And as MSB pointed out, an overall integration into the annual

report could also suggest that the topics such as sustainability are a core part of the company, instead of just something that the companies are obliged to publish.

However, companies could consider not focusing on a separate CSR report, since it does not have to be published separately (*CSR-Berichtspflicht*, n.d.). Yet, one of the main things to take away from the interviews on this topic is to be careful not to end up being accused of greenwashing and thereby also damaging reputation, similar to what is recommended in research (Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Therefore, again, what can be deduced is that it is not only important to share statements on sustainability and such, but also to translate words into action. The interviewees give various examples of this, whereby it is noticeable that the background idea is precisely to show what the companies are implementing and why, presenting their actions, motivations, and methods. These potential accusations and complexities are also examined in current studies, as well as the way in which they can be properly addressed online (Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies, 2023; Reilly & Hynan, 2014).

As has already become clear, the quantitative evaluation found that there is a positive correlation between perceived transparency after the two stimuli and corporate reputation, as well as trust. However, the fact that there are no statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups and that the perceived transparency after both stimuli was on average three and therefore more in the middle range can probably also be attributed to the complexity of these constructs. These are very difficult to build up, especially in a short time as highlighted by PHB. Examining the literature, Fombrun and Foss (2001) identified transparency as one of the five most important principles for building a good reputation. This is consistent with the interpretation of the results according to which the knowledge that transparency alone will not build a good reputation but must be part of a much larger corporate strategy. Further, automotive companies should back up their words with deeds and show what they are actively doing by disclosing information in order to gain the trust of consumers and build a good reputation. These recommendations of the interviewees and the deduction of the hypothesis three are therefore aligned with the results of the Reputation Institute. Yet, while sharing information is important, it also poses some difficulties.

The automotive industry is undergoing a transformation in which customers are no longer unconditionally loyal, but also ask many critical questions and expect both

sustainability and fairness to be part of corporate strategies. Companies must therefore now find a balance between profit maximization and social responsibility. Hereby, the provision of information, especially online and about topics such as supply chains, poses a complex challenge. Therefore, the focus should be on effective supply chain design to avoid possible negative media coverage and maintain customer trust. Complying with existing regulations can help achieve exactly that. HBV mentioned the Supply Chain Act during the interview. This law came into force at the beginning of 2023 and regulates the responsibility of German companies to comply with Human Rights in global supply chains. Companies with more than 3 000 employees in Germany must thus adhere to it (BMAS – Supply chain Act, n.d.). Therefore, this includes all of the German automotive companies mentioned earlier. And as the results of hypothesis one show, the dissemination of additional information does indeed seem to make a positive difference in the perception of transparency. However, in order to be able to communicate this information, the right decisions have to be made in advance. This was also hinted at by JRM during the interview, for example.

Further, the importance of social media for creating transparency in the automotive industry also became clear during the evaluation of the interviews, with respondents recognizing both the benefits and the challenges. According to their opinions, social media reaches younger target groups, offers broad access to information, facilitates interaction between companies and stakeholders and encourages valuable feedback. In addition, corporate messages can achieve a wider reach. Most of these findings are also addressed in various studies carried out by Ulas and Vural (2019), Carim and Warwick (2013), Gomez-Vasquez and Soto-Vélez, (2011), Vernuccio (2014), as well as Qiao (2019). Car manufacturers such as Audi and VW also communicate some of these points directly on their websites.

However, one of the critical issues is the need for balanced transparency, as an excess of information can be overwhelming. Challenges such as framing, the spread of disinformation and the potential for negative feedback to damage a company's reputation were also mentioned. Companies should therefore be aware that negative incidents can amplify problems disproportionately, and once information is online, it is permanently public. Furthermore, it was highlighted that companies need to become more transparent as they can no longer hide information so easily. In the literature section, the results of the study Corporate Excellence - Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable

Strategies (2023) that show that misinformation and fake news can be avoided through reliable and transparent communication were also presented. Further, Wu et al.'s (2016) recommendation about how rumors online should be addressed with facts was also described. The mentioned current challenges in the interviews are therefore already known.

Several key themes emerged during the interviews that provide insights into the concept of transparency outside of digital communication. In this case it means that not only positive effects were mentioned. It was also repeatedly pointed out that transparency is not easy to implement and has its downsides. Critical aspects were thus highlighted not only in relation to social media, but also in relation to transparency. Especially the complexity and challenges in implementation. This is also clear from the small differences between the control and experimental groups. Further, it was also claimed that some information is too complicated to be communicated transparently and there is always the possibility that it will not be properly understood. Then, there are also concerns about pretending to be transparent instead of actually opening up, which in this case could be classified under the concept of pseudo-transparency. In the literature this is explained as a strategic measure that companies use to appear transparent, instead of disclosing true information (Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2016). So, one must be careful that this does not become the primary motivation for companies when it comes to implementation. However, the fact that for example the interviewee JRM acknowledges this risk is good, because if the interviewee was not aware of it, this could be a sign of a lack of reflection. Nonetheless, it must always be kept in mind that transparency is subjective and can be perceived differently by everyone. From the interviews, especially the one with JRM, it can therefore be deduced that the primary concern must be that the people who work for the automotive industry want to communicate as transparently as possible.

The before mentioned finding that the transparency perception was higher after viewing the website than after the Instagram post can be interpreted to mean that the company's own channels may be perceived as more transparent. However, the available quantitative data only suggests this. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct another study to determine which channels consumers perceive as the most transparent. However, regarding the use of digital channels, the company's own website and digital channels such as the BMW Press Club were recommended in the interviews. According to the interviews, German automotive companies prefer to use their own digital corporate channels to have their own narrative and

thus communicate their ideas and objectives. Otherwise, social media channels such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube were highlighted. This aligns with the previously presented results that social media channels such as Instagram and Facebook are popular digital ways for automotive companies to communicate, adding a growing focus on LinkedIn, X and YouTube (Unmetric, 2019). Particularly LinkedIn was emphasized by Philipp Perwanger. The reason could be attributed to the professional focus and the ability to engage directly with potential employees and stakeholders. The results of the interviews thus provided room for interpretation that the platform's emphasis on professional networking and business-related content makes it a valuable tool for corporate communications and transparency efforts, particularly among automotive companies seeking to improve their digital presence and credibility. Further, social media also make it possible to share information in a much faster way with all stakeholders, which is a big advantage in today's fast-paced world (Cornelissen, 2020; Utz et al., 2013).

Despite the increasing use of digital communication, the importance of face-to-face communication is also emphasized. The trend seems to be towards hybrid events, i.e. events taking place both in person and digitally. Focus should be in the option of obtaining feedback, especially when it comes to own employees. This would represent a good mix of traditional and modern approaches, with the aim of highlighting different perspectives within the company and allowing employees and other stakeholders to express their views directly. The result would therefore be authentic cooperation and the promotion of a transparent corporate culture. Sustainability is also seen as both a challenge and an opportunity by half of those surveyed. The dual nature of sustainability underlines its importance in shaping future business practices and communication strategies. E-mobility is therefore also frequently cited by the interview partners as one of the most important challenges of the future. This reflects the ongoing transition of the automotive industry to electric vehicles and the associated complexity to stand out (Sperling, 2018).

Most interview partners defined transparency in the context of digital corporate communication. Since such a definition did not yet exist at the time of this writing of dissertation, the presented results represent an important contribution to achieving research objective two and thus fill a current research gap. Some statements were similar to each other, showing that honesty, communication efforts, openness and truth are crucial factors related to the concept of transparency and digital communication. Based on Rawlins' (2009)

definition on organizational transparency and Luoma-aho and Badham' (2023) definition on digital corporate communication and the input given by the interview partners, the following definition is suggested: "Transparency in digital corporate communication is the organization's strategic management of digital channels to foster reputation management and feedback. It includes communication efforts, by providing the same truthful, authentic and honest information, to all stakeholders simultaneously and delivering it in an open, comprehensible and accessible manner.". This definition shows the integration of both concepts and the essential elements for achieving transparent digital communication and could also serve as a basis for future research.

The third research objective, on the other hand, aimed at being able to derive how transparency can generally be used more effectively in digital corporate communication. To achieve this, the following recommendations can be drawn from the available quantitative and qualitative data, as well as the literature review.

Automotive companies should have accepted the strong emphasis on corporate social responsibility by now. It is no longer enough just to share statements or publish reports. The information needs to be presented in a creative way, must be easy to find and described in an understandable way. It is more important to actually do something than just communicate about what the plan is, otherwise, there is a risk of getting a greenwashing label or being dismissed as pseudo-transparent. It is therefore necessary to substantiate the company's measures with concrete figures and also show what has not been achieved and what the company will do about it. The same thing applies to complex topics such as supply chains or more complex technical issues relating to cars. The focus should always be on communicating these topics as clearly as possible so that no misunderstandings arise or, worse, misinformation is spread online. Further, this information should be easy to find. Therefore, this also means that a separate CSR report may not be necessary, as long as the automotive companies communicate about the topic and make it interesting, as the results of the second hypothesis show. This can be done on various digital platforms in particular, while the target group should always be kept in mind. Similar recommendations have already been made by authors such as Troise and Camilleri (2021), which also point out that it is important for CSR initiatives and corporate communication in general to use various social networks and other digital tools for corporate communication. However, these must be

carefully coordinated to ensure that the target groups are reached effectively. The recommended corporate communication channel mix that should be used by automotive image companies is outlined below, based on the interviews. Appendix M contains a summary of the recommendations presented, which can also be distributed as a digital flyer.

The evaluation of the first hypothesis showed, in particular, the positive effect of a high degree of transparency on Instagram. In addition, the analysis of the interviews also showed that digitalization as a whole continues to be a driving force shaping the field of corporate communications. Therefore, the integration of digital tools and social media platforms is essential to remain relevant and effective in today's digital world and build a good relationship with stakeholders.

Further, as highlighted by several interviewees the interactivity with consumers is therefore becoming increasingly important, which reflects the shift towards the need of more engaging and responsive communication strategies. This confirms Cornelissen's (2020) observation that stakeholder communication in particular is moving from a pure information strategy to generate awareness to a dialog strategy, especially through social media, in order to show commitment and build strong relationships. This will make it possible to maintain open communication in order to understand and respond effectively to consumer needs. A good digital communication strategy can help achieve this. When it comes to filtering out which digital channels automotive companies should best be active on, a combination of different channels can be recommended, including different social media channels, own press portals, blogs and regular email contact. However, traditional communication ways that promote a two-way flow, such as hybrid events, should also continue to be considered, which confirms current literature about merging traditional and innovative media formats (Oltarzhevskiy, 2019). Still, in order to plan their social media strategies effectively, automotive companies must be aware that, as also emphasized in FHB's interview, not every company needs to use platforms like TikTok, even though this particular channel is growing in popularity every year (Newman et al., 2023). Therefore, companies should of course be aware that social media is suitable for reaching younger audiences, but not all company messages need to be shared on all channels just because they are popular. Instead, it is much more important to prioritize. To do this, automotive companies should research thoroughly in advance to know where their target audience is located and choose the channels according

to the messages and the audience they want to reach, as explained by authors such as Schmidbauer and Knödler-Bunte (2004).

On the other hand, the content analysis of the interviews showed that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is recognized as the most significant trend in digital corporate communication, which aligns with the findings of the European Communication Monitor 2023 (Zerfaß et al., 2023), that especially highlight developments like popular AI software such as ChatGPT. This tool was also mentioned by several interview partners. While AI offers numerous advantages, there are also concerns about its influence on credibility, trust and transparency. There is a strong need for laws and regulations to prevent potential misuse. Companies should inform themselves about current regulations and when applying AI in the corporate communication and be open about its use. In addition, it was mentioned several times in the interviews that detailed information must be passed on carefully and in a way that everyone can understand. With the development of AI, this could be used as a tool to indicate whether the written text is understandable for digital communication and still provides all important information transparently.

Furthermore, data protection is also becoming increasingly important these days as mentioned by ASA. All automotive companies must manage to maintain transparency while still protecting sensitive information. Vaccaro and Madsen's (2006) also address how data protection is an important ethical concern and a sensitive subject, especially in today's digital age.

The biggest recommendation that can be made after analyzing the interviews is that the goal of transparency must be promoted within the company itself. This means that transparency must be practiced in all departments, which in turn will influence corporate communication both online and offline as well as internally and externally. This can be achieved in many ways. While sharing ethical rules and behaviors is a common approach, many will not read the regulations. For example, employers need to ensure that knowledge, particularly about the products and strategies associated with CSR, can be shared between departments and sites via workshops or webinars. Therefore, transparency should be an essential part of the strategy, vision, mission management style and ultimately the goal of automotive companies. These are all elements that influence the corporate identity of automobile companies (Paliderova et al., 2015). Companies should therefore also adapt their behavior and corporate communication accordingly, as both aspects are an integral part of

this identity and need to be coordinated to be most effective (Paurova & Chlebkova, 2020; Wellbrock et al., 2020).

5.1. Limitations

This chapter considers the limitations of the study. The first thing worth mentioning about this particular study is that it focuses exclusively on the German automotive industry. And although the previously listed reasons for this focus are valid, such as the power position of this industry worldwide (Statista Research Department, 2023), a clear industry- and country focus always limits generalizability (Brosius et al., 2016; Wissuwa & Durach, 2023). It would therefore be advantageous to examine the topic of transparency in digital corporate communication also in different industries and countries (Wissuwa & Durach, 2023). Moreover, various sampling methods were used to obtain as many survey participants as possible. Since an online survey is not without sources of error, this collection procedure could negatively influence the sample representativeness (Taddicken, 2013).

As mentioned several times, the constructs surveyed such as trust, reputation, and especially transparency, are very complex and multidimensional constructs. This complexity became clear both in the creation of the survey and in the analysis of the quantitative results. Instruments were selected that had already been used in other research studies in order to survey them correctly. However, the scales had to be adapted, which may have influenced the validity.

Further, if one also looks at the quantitative results presented, there are predominantly correlative relationships, which makes it difficult to clearly determine a cause-and-effect relationship. Due to the form of the available variables, it was also not possible to carry out multiple regression analyses and include control variables. However, the t-tests carried out for the penultimate and last hypotheses showed that there was no significant difference with regard to reputation and trust, although a connection can be seen. As already briefly suggested in the discussion, this may be due to the fact that other factors, rather than the transparency level of the stimuli, influence this connection. Due to the very long time it took to complete the survey, no other additional constructs were asked about in addition to the classic demographic factors, which could be seen as a weakness of the quantitative study. In addition, the length of the survey may have led to some reduction in concentration towards the end, which may have influenced the quality of the answers as also indicated by the results of the control question. The rather long duration may have also led to the high dropout rate.

All these limitations have also already been investigated in research (Andreadis & Kartsounidou, 2020; Brosius et al., 2016).

Additionally, as already explained in the discussion section, there was no major difference in the second stimulus between the experimental group, which mentioned the CSR report and the control group, that only commented on the topic of CSR. This may be because the text was the same and thus addressed the issue of transparency as a whole. For future research, the difference in the two groups would probably have to be a little larger in order to test for a larger effect. This could be achieved, for example, by giving the participants in the experimental group the opportunity to actually read parts of a CSR report.

Another effect that was particularly noticeable in the evaluation was the tendency towards the middle of the survey participants. Many participants tended to select "somewhat agree", which leads to the question of whether this actually corresponds to their attitude or not (Brosius et al., 2016). For further research a different scale level could therefore be potentially better.

Moreover, the interviewer can be seen as a source of random and systematic errors. In this work, the researcher and investigator were the same. Therefore, a slight influence on the responses of the interviewees just from the presence of the researcher cannot be ruled out (Brosius et al., 2016; Creswell, 2009). The characteristics that may trigger effects include social characteristics such as age or gender, learning and habituation effects that may occur during the course of the study and the interviewees' expectations. This leads to the phenomenon of social desirability⁶, which in this case could have occurred both while filling out the online surveys and conducting the interviews (Brosius et al., 2016). Particularly in the case of sensitive questions regarding transparency in the corporate communication of automotive companies, it may well be that the interviewees are more likely to express socially accepted opinions. However, it must be mentioned here that during most of the interviews, the negative aspects of implementing transparency in digital communication came up and were welcomed.

Another limitation could be that, despite the very high level of expertise in the communication sector and in the automotive industry of all interviewees, only four people currently work in a German automotive company. This may mean that detailed internal

⁶ Definition social desirability: „This effect is triggered by the fact that respondents are reluctant to express a socially unacceptable opinion that isolates them from the (presumed!) majority opinion“ (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 92)

industry information was not shared on a broad scale, which potentially limits the results. However, many people currently working in German automotive companies were just not willing to take part in interviews. Perhaps it would have been easier to obtain these contacts if this study had been conducted in a company itself.

6. Conclusion & future directions

The discussion of the findings ultimately helps to answer the research question “*What role does transparency play in the digital corporate communication of German automotive companies, and how do they implement it?*”, as it becomes clear that transparency is essential in digital corporate communication. Despite the complexities and numerous challenges associated with the implementation of transparency, this study makes it clear how its role is central to building corporate success and reputation, as well as fostering trust in the company's activities, therefore, confirming the existing body of research and contributing with new insights on the transparency in the automotive digital corporate communication (Baesecke, 2015; Kim & Lee, 2018; Fombrun & Foss (2001).

However, while, for example, disclosing detailed information was found to be important for the implementation of transparency, this publication should be done with care. Too much information can cause confusion and raise even more questions, which, in turn, can lead to dissatisfaction among customers and other stakeholders. Particularly in today's hyper-connected world, where communication predominantly occurs via social media, companies need to be aware of both the advantages and risks and its impact on the corporate reputation of automobile companies (Cornelissen, 2020; Petrosyan, 2023; Utz et al., 2013).

The feedback function provided by social media can be a good opportunity to engage in dialogue with consumers and demonstrate that their opinions are valued. However, this can also quickly lead to "shitstorms", the spread of false information, and can be used as a platform not for constructive criticism but simply for complaints. Nevertheless, the potential interaction is seen as one of the greatest advantages of using social media to promote transparency and build relationships, which confirms current research by Cortado and Chalmeta (2016), Moore et al. (2015) and Qiao (2019).

These findings help confirm the first hypothesis as well as the third and fourth hypotheses, and also answer research questions one and two. Through the mixed-methods approach, it was therefore possible to verify the previously assumed positive effects with the

help of experimental surveys and to identify further advantages, challenges and trends of transparency in digital communication through interviews. These particularly highlight the importance of transparency in digital corporate communication. A new definition could also be compiled, supplementing the existing one about digital corporate communication with new insights about transparency and enriching the answer to research question three, which therefore also makes a contribution to existing research conducted by Rawlins' (2009) and Luoma-aho and Badham' (2023).

In addition, when analyzing both methods, it became clear again that digitalization remains a driving force shaping corporate communications and the automotive industry (Bormann et al., 2018; Lock 2019). The integration of digital tools and platforms is therefore essential to stay relevant and effective in today's digital world. Both the survey and the interviews conducted showed that alongside some social media channels, the company's own website is a popular digital transparency tool.

For the future, various recommendations were made, aiming to keep paying attention to current trends, such as AI and CSR, in digital corporate communication of the automotive industry while creatively addressing these topics which thus confirms existing literature (Liu et al., 2023; Zerfaß et al., 2023).

Moreover, the finding of the rather low transparency perception regarding the CSR report in the experimental group as well as some comments from the interviewees lead to the conclusion that, to better respond to current and future challenges, German automotive companies need to do more than just what is required by law. A proactive approach, providing authentic and honest information digitally to all stakeholders, is essential for achieving goals such as building good corporate reputation, earning trust and being perceived as transparent. Transparency therefore must be part of the corporate identity of automotive companies and thus integrated into digital corporate communication and corporate behavior.

All these contributions are therefore highly beneficial for the automotive industry as well as for communication and marketing professionals, since they confirm many presented conducted studies. However, to deepen the presented results future research could aim to increase the difference in the *stimuli* presented to both the experimental and control group, to generate larger effects. As already indicated, one approach could be to give the participants of the experimental group the opportunity to read parts of a CSR report or, taking

the interviewees' suggestions, to present different communication ways where the topic of CSR is approached creatively and interactively. In addition, the proposed definition of transparency in digital corporate communication, provides a solid basis for future studies, research could further explore and confirm it. Moreover, the recommendation to implement transparency within companies should also be further researched to find out the best methods for achieving this and to understand its potential impact on the perceived transparency trust and corporate reputation.

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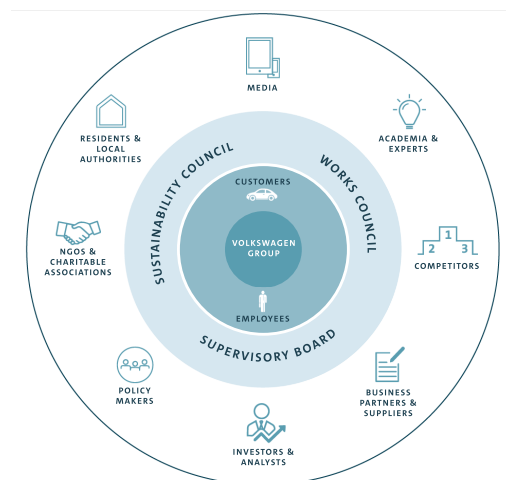
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Appendices

Appendix A: Volkswagen Group's stakeholders



Source: Volkswagen AG (2023, p. 170).

Appendix B: Corporate website research

Corporate Website	BMW Group	Volkswagen Group	Audi AG	Mercedes-Benz Group	Porsche AG (News Room)
Financial Results	X	X	X	X	X
Sustainability section	X	X	X	X	X
ESG / CSR section	X	X	X	X	
Transparency statements	X	X	X	X	X
Designated transparency area /documents				X	X
Sustainability Report		X	X	X	
Integrated Report	X		X		X
GRI content index		X	X		X

Note. Own illustration based on information from the corporate websites of the five German automotive companies. The GRI content index was found in the Audi Report 2022.

Appendix C: Operationalization of the concepts for the online survey

THEORETICAL CONCEPT	DIMENSIONS	NUMBER IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE & ITEMS	SCALE	SOURCE	HYPOTHESIS
Transparency	Overall Transparency	1) The organization wants to understand how its decisions affect people like me. 2) The organization provides information that is useful to people like me for making informed decisions. 3) The organization wants to be accountable to people like me for its actions. 4) The organization wants people like me to know what it is doing and why it is doing it.	5-point Scale between “strongly disagree & strongly agree”	Rawlins (2008)	Hypothesis1 & Hypothesis2
	Participation	5) Asks for feedback from people like me about the quality of its information. X Involves people like me to help identify the information I need. 6) Provides detailed information to people like me. 7) Makes it easy to find the information people like me need. X Asks the opinions of people like me before making decisions.			
	Substantial Information	X Provides information in a timely fashion to people like me. 8) Provides information that is relevant to people like me. 9) Provides information that can be compared to previous performance. 10) Provides information that is complete. 11) Provides information that is easy for people like me to understand. 12) Provides accurate information to people like me. 13) Provides information that is reliable			
	Accountability	14) Presents more than one side of controversial issues. 16) Is forthcoming with information that might be damaging to the organization. X Is open to criticism by people like me. X Freely admits when it has made mistakes. 15) Provides information that can be compared to industry standards.			
	Secrecy (reverse item)	16) Provides only part of the story to people like me. 17) Often leaves out important details in the information it provides to people like me. 18) Provides information that is intentionally written in a way to make it difficult to understand. X Is slow to provide information to people like me. 19) Only discloses information when it is required.			

THEORETICAL CONCEPT	DIMENSIONS	NUMBER IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE & ITEMS	SCALE	SOURCE	HYPOTHESIS
Corporate Reputation (short scale)	Customer orientation	X Has employees who treat customers courteously X Has employees who are concerned about customer needs 22) Is concerned about its customers	5-point Scale between “strongly disagree & strongly agree”	Walsh et al. (2009)	Hypothesis 3
	Good Employee	23) Looks like a good company to work for 24) Seems to treat its people well X Seems to have excellent leadership			
	Reliable and Financially Strong Company	X Tends to outperform competitors 25) Seems to recognize and take advantage of market opportunities 26) Looks like it has strong prospects for future growth			
	Social and Environmental Responsibility	X Seems to make an effort to create new jobs 27) Seems to be environmentally responsible 28) Would reduce its profits to ensure a clean environment			
	Product and Service Quality	29) Is a strong, reliable company 30) Develops innovative services 31) Offers high quality products and services			
Trust	Overall Trust	32) I’m willing to let the organization make decisions for people like me. 33) I think it is important to watch this organization closely so that it does not take advantage of people like me. 34) I trust the organization to take care of people like me.	5-point Scale between “strongly disagree & strongly agree”	Rawlins (2008)	Hypothesis 4
	Competence	35) I feel very confident about the skills of this organization. X This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do. X This organization is known to be successful at the things it tries to do.			
	Integrity	36) The organization treats people like me fairly and justly. 37) The organization can be relied on to keep its promises. X Sound principles seem to guide the behavior of this organization. 38) This organization does not mislead people like me.			
	Goodwill	39) Whenever this organization makes a decision I know it will be concerned about people like me. 40) I believe this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions. 41) This organization is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself.			

Note. Own illustration based on Möhring & Schlütz (2019, p.16). The red color indicates both the removed items and the deleted words.

Appendix D: Experimental online survey

Qualtrics Survey Software

25.07.24, 16:48



Default Question Block

Dear participants,

as part of my master's thesis for the "Strategic Communication and Leadership" program at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, I am conducting an online survey on the topic of digital corporate communication in the German automotive industry.

The whole process will take about 10 minutes of your time. Participation in this survey is voluntary and the data will only be used in the context of the research interest. Your data will be stored securely and the survey and evaluation will be anonymous. Please only take part if you live in Germany and are over 18 years old.

Thank you for your participation and assistance in my research project. If you have any further questions, please contact me at any time at the e-mail address s-lacanunes@ucp.pt

Thank you very much for your help,

https://ucp.cienciashumanas.eu/qualtrics.com/Q/EditSection/Bloc...rveyID=SV_3KEESv0Z8BP400K&ContextLibraryID=UR_50cy8ckX7zng0u Seite 1 von 27

Please click on "I consent" if you have understood the above information and would like to participate in this study voluntarily.

I consent

Location

Do you live in Germany?

Yes

No

Age

How old are you?

Under 18

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-59

60 and older

Instagram transparency high

https://lucpcienciashumanas.eu.qualtrics.com/Q/EditSection/Bloc...rveyID=SV_3KEE3v0z6BP4Q0K&ContextLibraryID=UR_50cy8CXI7zhgDu Seite 2 von 37

Qualtrics Survey Software 25.07.24, 16:48

A leading German car manufacturer has recently announced the launch of a new vehicle. Below you will see an Instagram post introducing the new model, then you will be asked to answer some questions about your perception of this company. Please read it carefully.

 **LCN** · Following
Berlin, DE



146,934 likes
LCN Naturally dynamic, powerful & electric. 🚗

This innovative model integrates e-mobility, technology, and a sustainable design all in one, featuring FSC-certified wood and a natural fiber floor mat. Stringent quality and safety standards were prioritized throughout production, demonstrating our commitment to economic, ecological, and social responsibility across the value chain. 🌱 ⚡

Power consumption in kWh/100 km: 12,1-19,9. CO₂ emissions combined in g/km: 0. CO₂ class: A. Official data on power consumption was determined in accordance with the prescribed measurement procedure and complies with Regulation (EU) 715/2007 as amended.

#eMobility#sustainability#innovation

[View all 16 comments](#)

6 days ago

The organization...

...shows that it understands how its decisions affect people.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is useful for making informed decisions.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...wants to be accountable for its actions.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...wants people to know what it is doing and why it is doing it.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...would ask for feedback about the quality of its information.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides detailed information.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...makes it easy to find the information.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...provides information that is relevant.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is complete.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree

...provides information that is easy to understand.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides accurate information.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is reliable.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...presents more than one side of controversial issues.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...is forthcoming with information that might be damaging to the organization.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that can be compared to industry standards.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...provides only part of the story.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...leaves out important details in the information it provides.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is intentionally written in a way to make it difficult to understand.

Strongly disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

 Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree

...only discloses information when it is required.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Website transparency high

The same leading German car manufacturer has recently published its corporate responsibility report on its corporate website and also made it available for download. Please take a close look at the screenshot of the corporate website and then answer the questions about your perception.



Perceived transparency (DV - high)

The organization...

...shows that it understands how its decisions affect people.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is useful for making informed decisions.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...wants to be accountable for its actions.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...wants people to know what it is doing and why it is doing it.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...would ask for feedback about the quality of its information.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides detailed information.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...makes it easy to find the information.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...provides information that is relevant.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is complete.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is easy to understand.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides accurate information.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is reliable.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

You're almost done, just a few more questions!

The organization...

...presents more than one side of controversial issues.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...is forthcoming with information that might be damaging to the organization.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that can be compared to industry standards.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...provides only part of the story.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...leaves out important details in the information it provides.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...provides information that is intentionally written in a way to make it difficult to understand.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...only discloses information when it is required.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Corporate Reputation (DV) - high

Considering the TWO IMAGES presented before, please answer the following questions.

The organization...

...is concerned about its customers.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...looks like a good company to work for.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...seems to treat its people well.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...seems to recognize and take advantage of market opportunities.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...looks like it has strong prospects for future growth.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...seems to be environmentally responsible.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...would reduce its profits to ensure a clean environment.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization...

...is a strong, reliable company.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...develops innovative services.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

...offers high quality products and services.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

For this question, please ignore the following options and select "Strongly agree".

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Trust (DV) - high

Now please share your opinion on the following statements:

I'm willing to let the organization make decisions for me.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

I think it is important to watch this organization closely so that it does not take advantage of people.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

I trust the organization to take care of people like me.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

I feel very confident about the skills of this organization.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization treats people like me fairly and justly.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

The organization can be relied on to keep its promises.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

This organization does not mislead people.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Whenever this organization makes a decision I know it will be concerned about people.

https://uipcienclashumanas.eu.qualtrics.com/Q/EditSection/Blo...rveyID=SY_3KEE3v028BPdQK&ContextLibraryID=UR_S0cy8CK7Zhg0u Seite 18 von 37

Qualtrics Survey Software

25.07.24, 16:48

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

I believe this organization takes the opinions of people into account when making decisions.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

This organization is interested in the well-being of people, not just itself.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Socio-Demographics

Which gender do you feel you belong to?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

What is your current occupation? Multiple choices are possible here.

- Student
- Voluntary Service (FSJ / FÖJ / BuFDI)
- Intern
- Employed
- Self-Employed
- Unemployed
- Other

The control group received the same survey expect the stimuli were different:

Stimulus1:

Instagram transparency low

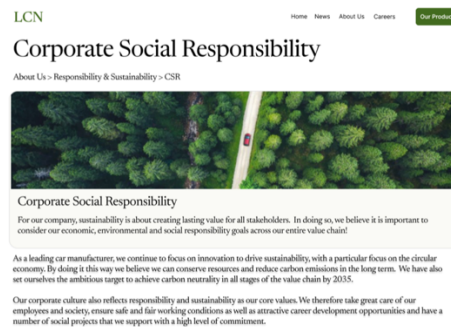
A leading German car manufacturer has recently announced the launch of a new vehicle. Below you will see an Instagram post introducing the new model, then you will be asked to answer some questions about your perception of this company. Please read it carefully.



Stimulus2:

Website transparency low

The same leading German car manufacturer has recently updated its corporate social responsibility section on its corporate website. Please take a close look at the screenshot of the corporate website and then answer the questions about your perception.



Appendix E: Reliability checkTable 1: *Reliability check with the pretest data*

Scale	Number of items	N	Cronbachs Alpha
EG_Transparency	19	11	.70
EGWeb_Transparency	19	11	.89
EG_Trust	10	11	.81
EG_Corporate Reputation	10	11	.12
CG_Transparency	19	11	.74
CGWeb_Transparency	19	11	.89
CG_Trust	10	11	.77
CG_Corporate Reputation	10	11	.76

Table 2: *Reliability check with the survey data*

Scale	Number of items	N	Cronbachs Alpha
EG_Transparency	19	100	.90
EGWeb_Transparency	19	100	.81
EG_Trust	10	100	.88
EG_Corporate Reputation	10	100	.89
CG_Transparency	19	90	.88
CGWeb_Transparency	19	90	.90
CG_Trust	10	90	.82
CG_Corporate Reputation	10	90	.87

Appendix F: Operationalization of the interview guideline

MAIN CATEGORIES	RESEARCH OBJECTIVES OR RESEARCH QUESTION TO ADDRESS	OPEN QUESTIONS	THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Introduction		1) „Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic <i>“Transparency in the digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry”</i> “.	
		2) Quick general information about the interview structure	
Personal Question:	DEMOGRAPHY	1) Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later?	
	WORK POSITION	2) Can you briefly introduce yourself and your function in your company? For instance, what are your daily responsibilities and tasks?	
QUESTION 1 - IMPLEMENTATION OF CC	RESEARCH QUESTION	1) How has transparency been implemented into your digital corporate communication strategies?	Avery & Graham (2013), Bertot et al. (2010), Cornelissen, DiStaso and Bortree (2012), Global Reporting Initiative (2023), Hultman and Axelsson (2007), Liu et al. (2023), Meintjes (2021), Saxton & Waters (2014), Wong et al. (2021)
	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2 & 3	<i>Possible additional Question a): Which online channels do you use? (Social networks, company websites, press portals?)</i>	Hofstätter et al. (2020), Infosys (2018), Svobodová et al. (2019), Unmetric (2019)
	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2 & 3 + RESEARCH QUESTION	<i>Possible additional Question b) Can you share examples?</i>	
	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1	<i>Possible additional Question c) What importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency?</i>	Avery & Graham (2013), Bertot et al. (2010), Saxton & Waters (2014)
QUESTION 2 - CORPORATE REPUTATION	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1	2) How do you think the transparency level of your digital corporate communication influences positively the perception of your company's reputation among consumers?	Baesecke (2015), Fombrun & Foss (2001), DiStaso & Bortree (2012) and Eck (2012)
	RESEARCH QUESTION	<i>Possible additional Question a) Can you provide examples?</i>	
	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2	<i>Possible additional Question b) Could you name factors that could positively influence the company's reputation?</i>	The Global PR & Communication Model 2021, Borden & Zhang, (2023) Fombrun, (2004), Jahansoozi, (2006), Kim & Lee, (2018), Rawlins, (2008)
QUESTION 3 - PRODUCTION INFORMATION & PERCEPTION OF TRANSPARENCY	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1 & 2 + RESEARCH QUESTION	3) In your opinion, to what extent does the provision of detailed product information contribute to the perception of transparency?	Cornelissen (2020), Sodhi & Tang (2019), Wellbrock et al. (2020)
QUESTION 4 - CSR & PERCEPTION OF TRANSPARENCY	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1	4) How does the publication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports contribute to the perceived transparency of your company?	Cornelissen (2020) Reilly & Hynan (2014), Ula and Vural's (2019)
	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2 + RESEARCH QUESTION	<i>Possible additional Question: Could you describe how your company integrates CSR into its digital corporate communication?</i>	Paliderova et al. (2015), Paurova & Chlebikova (2020), Wellbrock et al. (2020)
QUESTION 5 - POSITIVE EFFECTS, CURRENT & FUTURE CHALLENGES	RESEARCH QUESTION	5) Which are the positive effects of transparent digital corporate communication from your point of view?	Adeline et al. (2012); Christensen (2002), Dou & Krishnamurthy (2007), Eck (2012), Russell & Bertino (2015), Pollach (2005), Suck et al. (2022)
	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2	<i>Possible additional Question a): And what are the current challenges of transparent digital corporate communication ?</i>	Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies (2023)
	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2	<i>Possible additional Question b): And future challenges?</i>	<i>Protecting intangible assets: Preparing for a new reality</i> (2020), Baller & Schaller (2017)
QUESTION 6 & 7 FUTURE TRENDS & DEFINITION	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2 + RESEARCH QUESTION	6) What trends do you see for the future of digital corporate communications?	Batrinca & Treleven (2015), Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies (2023), Harris Lipschultz (2020)
	RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2	7) Final Question: How would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication?	Luoma-aho and Badham (2023), Rawlins (2009)

Note. Own illustration. These Questions were asked during the interviews with communication experts working in the German automotive industry

Appendix G: Interview guidelines

Figure 1: *Version – Communication experts that work in the German automotive industry*

Introduction	<p>1) Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic “<i>Transparency in the digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry</i>”.</p> <p>2) Quick general information about the interview structure.</p>
Personal Questions	<p>1) Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later?</p> <p>2) Can you briefly introduce yourself and your function in your company? For instance, what are your daily responsibilities and tasks?</p>
Question 1	<p>1) How has transparency been implemented into your digital corporate communication strategies?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a): Which online channels do you use? (Social networks, company websites, press portals?)</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b): Can you share examples?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question c) What importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency?</i></p>
Question 2	<p>2) How do you think the transparency level of your digital corporate communication influences positively the perception of a company's reputation among consumers?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a) Can you provide examples?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b) Could you name factors that could positively influence the company's reputation?</i></p>
Question 3	<p>3) In your opinion, to what extent does the provision of detailed product information contribute to the perception of transparency in the automotive industry?</p>
Question 4	<p>4) How does the publication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports contribute to the perceived transparency of your company?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question: Could you describe how your company integrates CSR into its digital corporate communication?</i></p>
Question 5	<p>5) Which are the positive effects of transparent digital corporate communication from your point of view?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a): And what are the current challenges of transparent digital corporate communication ?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b): And future challenges?</i></p>
Final Questions (depending on the remaining time)	<p>6) What trends do you see for the future of digital corporate communications?</p> <p>7) Final Question: How would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication?</p>

Figure 2: *Version - Communication experts that used to work in the German automotive industry*

Introduction	<p>1) Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic “<i>Transparency in the digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry</i>”.</p> <p>2) Quick general information about the interview structure.</p>
Personal Questions	<p>1) Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later?</p> <p>2) Can you briefly introduce yourself and your function in your company? For instance, what are your daily responsibilities and tasks?</p> <p>3) You used to work for an automotive company. What were your daily responsibilities and tasks?</p>
Question 1	<p>1) How was transparency implemented into the digital corporate communication strategies?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a): Which online channels did you use? (Social networks, company websites, press portals?)</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b) Can you share examples?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question c) What importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency?</i></p>
Question 2	<p>2) How do you think the transparency level of digital corporate communication influences positively the perception of a company's reputation among consumers?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a) Can you provide examples?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b) Could you name factors that could positively influence the company's reputation?</i></p>
Question 3	<p>3) In your opinion, to what extent does the provision of detailed product information contribute to the perception of transparency in the automotive industry?</p>
Question 4	<p>4) How does the publication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports contribute to the perceived transparency of a company in the automotive industry?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question: Could you describe how your company integrated CSR into its digital corporate communication?</i></p>
Question 5	<p>5) Which are the positive effects of transparent digital corporate communication from your point of view?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a): And what are the current challenges of transparent digital corporate communication ?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b): And future challenges?</i></p>
Final Questions (depending on the remaining time)	<p>6) What trends do you see for the future of digital corporate communications?</p> <p>7) Final Question: How would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication?</p>

Figure 3: *Version - Communication consultants that work in the German automotive industry*

Introduction	<p>1) „Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic <i>“Transparency in the digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry”</i>”.</p> <p>2) Quick general information about the interview structure</p>
Personal Questions:	<p>1) Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation?</p> <p>2) Can you briefly introduce yourself and your function in your current company?</p>
Question 1	<p>1) In your opinion, how should transparency be implemented into the digital corporate communication strategies of automotive companies?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a): Which online channels should be used? (Social networks, company websites, press portals?)</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b) What importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency?</i></p>
Question 2	<p>2) How do you think the transparency level of digital corporate communication influences positively the perception of a company's reputation among consumers?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a) Can you provide examples?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b) Could you name factors that could positively influence the company's reputation?</i></p>
Question 3	<p>3) In your opinion, to what extent does the provision of detailed product information contribute to the perception of transparency in the automotive industry?</p>
Question 4	<p>4) How does the publication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports contribute to the perceived transparency of a company in the automotive industry?</p>
Question 5	<p>5) Which are the positive effects of transparent digital corporate communication from your point of view in the automotive industry?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a): And what are the current challenges of transparent digital corporate communication ?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b): And future challenges?</i></p>
Final Questions (depending on the remaining time)	<p>6) What trends do you see for the future of digital corporate communications?</p> <p>7) Final Question: How would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication?</p>

Figure 4: *Version - Communication experts that work for German automotive companies in Portugal*

Introduction	<p>1) „Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic <i>“Transparency in the digital corporate communication of the german automotive industry”</i>”.</p> <p>2) Quick general information about the interview structure.</p> <p>3) Indication that the questions always refer to the german parent brand in general</p>
Personal Questions	<p>1) “Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later?”</p> <p>2) "Can you briefly introduce yourself and your function in your company? For instance, what are your daily responsibilities and tasks?"</p>
Question 1	<p>1) In your opinion, how is transparency implemented into the digital corporate communication strategies of automotive companies?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a): Which online channels should be used? (Social networks, company websites, press portals?)</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b) What importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency?</i></p>
Question 2	<p>2) How do you think the transparency level of digital corporate communication influences positively the perception of a company's reputation among consumers?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a) Can you provide examples?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b) Could you name factors that could positively influence the company's reputation?</i></p>
Question 3	<p>3) In your opinion, to what extent does the provision of detailed product information contribute to the perception of transparency in the automotive industry?</p>
Question 4	<p>4) How does the publication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports contribute to the perceived transparency of a company in the automotive industry?</p>
Question 5	<p>5) Which are the positive effects of transparent digital corporate communication from your point of view?</p> <p><i>Possible additional Question a): And what are the current challenges of transparent digital corporate communication ?</i></p> <p><i>Possible additional Question b): And future challenges?</i></p>
Final Questions (depending on the remaining time)	<p>6) What trends do you see for the future of digital corporate communications?</p> <p>7) Final Question: How would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication?</p>

Figure 5: *Translated Version in German - Communication experts that work for German automotive companies in Portugal*

Introduction	1) "Vielen Dank, dass Sie sich die Zeit genommen haben, meine Fragen zum Thema "Transparenz in der digitalen Unternehmenskommunikation der deutschen Automobilindustrie" zu beantworten.
	2) Kurze allgemeine Informationen über die Struktur des Interviews
Personal Question:	Können Sie sich und Ihre Funktion in Ihrem Unternehmen kurz vorstellen? Was sind zum Beispiel Ihre täglichen Verantwortlichkeiten und Aufgaben?
Question 1	1) Wie wurde die Transparenz in Ihre Strategien der digitalen Unternehmenskommunikation integriert? <i>Mögliche zusätzliche Frage a): Welche Online-Kanäle nutzen Sie? (Soziale Netzwerke, Unternehmenswebseiten, Presseportale?)</i> <i>Mögliche zusätzliche Frage b) Können Sie Beispiele nennen?</i> <i>Mögliche Zusatzfrage c) Welche Bedeutung messen Sie den sozialen Netzwerken im Hinblick auf die Transparenz bei?</i>
Question 2	2) Wie wirkt sich Ihrer Meinung nach das Transparenzniveau Ihrer digitalen Unternehmenskommunikation positiv auf die Wahrnehmung des Rufs Ihres Unternehmens bei den Verbrauchern aus? <i>Mögliche zusätzliche Fragen a) Können Sie Beispiele nennen?</i> <i>Mögliche Zusatzfrage b) Können Sie Faktoren nennen, die den Ruf des Unternehmens positiv beeinflussen könnten?</i>
Question 3	3) Inwieweit trägt Ihrer Meinung nach die Bereitstellung detaillierter Produktinformationen zur Wahrnehmung von Transparenz bei?
Question 4	4) Wie trägt die Veröffentlichung von Berichten über die soziale Verantwortung von Unternehmen (CSR) zur wahrgenommenen Transparenz Ihres Unternehmens bei? <i>Mögliche Zusatzfrage: Können Sie beschreiben, wie Ihr Unternehmen CSR in seine digitale Unternehmenskommunikation integriert?</i>
Question 5	5) Was sind aus Ihrer Sicht die positiven Effekte einer transparenten digitalen Unternehmenskommunikation? <i>Mögliche Zusatzfrage a): Und was sind die aktuellen Herausforderungen einer transparenten digitalen Unternehmenskommunikation?</i> <i>Mögliche zusätzliche Frage b): Und zukünftige Herausforderungen?</i>
Final Questions (depending on the remaining time)	6) Welche Trends sehen Sie für die Zukunft der digitalen Unternehmenskommunikation? 7) Letzte Frage: Wie würden Sie Transparenz im Kontext der digitalen Unternehmenskommunikation definieren?

Appendix H: Consent form



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Declaration of consent to the collection and processing of interview data

Master's dissertation: “Unveiling clarity in a digital world: transparency in the digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry”

Interviewer: Lara Cardoso Nunes

Interview date: _____

The ethical procedures applicable to scientific research require that participants explicitly express their agreement with this participation and with the way in which the data collected will be used. This consent form is required to ensure that you understand the purpose of your participation, and that you agree with the procedures proposed for the study. Thank you in advance for your participation in this study.

Please sign this form, proving your agreement with the following:

- I agree to take part in an interview as part of the above-mentioned master dissertation. I have been informed about the aim and the course of the research project.
- I agree that the interview may be recorded and put into written form by a typing pool.
- I agree that the audio files will be saved, and the transcripts of the interviews will be... [please check what you agree with]:
 - completely anonymized, i.e. stored without names and personal details such as company name and job position
 - partially anonymized, i.e. stored without names but mentioning the company name and job position
 - partially anonymized, i.e. stored without names and company name but mentioning job position
 - not anonymized, i.e. stored with names and personal details
- I agree that the access to the transcripts of the interviews will be limited to researchers from the Portuguese Catholic University.



UNIVERSIDADE CATOLICA PORTUGUESA

- I understand that my words may be quoted directly, and I agree that Ms. Cardoso Nunes may use these quotes in her master dissertation, while attributing them to a pseudonym or code according to the selected way of anonymization above.

My participation in the survey and my consent to the use of the data as described above are voluntary. I have the option to withdraw my consent at any time. I will not suffer any disadvantages as a result of refusal or revocation. I have the right to information, rectification, blocking and erasure, restriction of processing, objection to further processing and data portability of my personal data.

Under these conditions, I agree to give the interview and consent to it being recorded, transcribed, anonymized and analyzed.

Signature

Date

Researcher

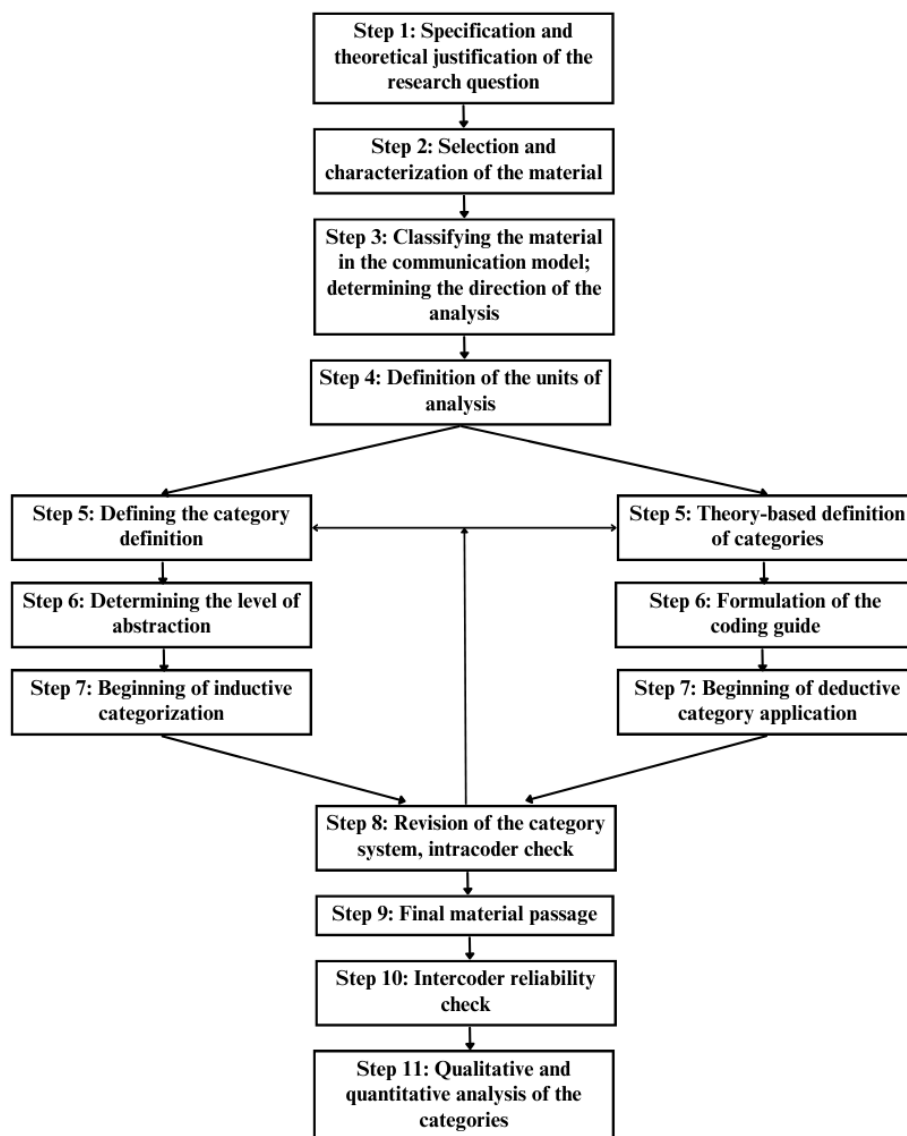
I have explained the study procedures to the participant before asking for their signature above. There are no blank spaces in this document.

Lara Nunes

Signature

Date

Appendix I: Qualitative category formation



Note. Model of inductive category formation and deductive category application.

Own illustration based on Mayring & Brunner (2006) taken from Mayring & Fenzel (2014, p. 550).

Appendix J: Deductive and indicative coding scheme

CATEGORIES / SUBCATEGORIES	Qualitative content analysis approach	DEFINITION / CODING RULE	SOURCE	ANCHOR EXAMPLE
C1 Implementation of transparency in digital corporate communication	Deductive	The interviewee talks about the general implementation of transparency	Vaccaro and Madsen (2006), Wong et al. (2021)	"you have to be completely digital in the topic journey, in the communication journey, in the communication process of a company with its various stakeholder groups, and it's all good, so you have to provide a mixture of digital communication and human communication at every touchpoint that is passed through in this journey(...)" (PHB)
C1.1 Publishing Annual Reports	Deductive	The interviewee mentions the reporting of the organizations activities with the aim to be transparent	Global Reporting Initiative (2024), Pichler & Lehner (2017), Thompson (2023), Urman & Makhortych (2023)	"So there are reports that you have to deliver in terms of transparency" (JRM)
C1.2 Social Media Usage	Deductive	Social media is used as a tool for transparency	Gomez-Vasquez, L., & Soto-Vélez, I. (2011), Unmetric (2019), Hofstätter et al. (2020), Infosys (2018), Svobodová et al. (2019)	"Well, I think with having everything quite fast on social media and in the Internet you have to create a channel to give information" (Alexandra Landers)
C1.3 Responsibility	Deductive	Transparency is implemented as also taking responsibility for one's decisions	Taiminen et al. (2015), Zorkočiová et al., 2014	"There are more and more regulations and more and more far-reaching regulations, which you then have to take responsibility for, even because they are no longer in your own country or in countries where you can even check whether you are doing what they say. And yet responsibility has to be taken." (JRM)
C1.4 Consistency	Deductive	Companies need to be consistent	Cornelissen (2020), Faria (2023), Fombrun & Rindova (2000), Zerfuß et al. (2023)	"That's why they have to communicate strategically and not selectively, but really maintain it. Yes, and you have to be consistent and this opening up that you are doing has to be sustainable, otherwise it won't work." (Philipp Perwanger)
C1.5 Mix between traditional and digital communication	Deductive	A balanced mix of traditional and digital channels is crucial for an effective transparent communication	Cornelissen (2020), Oltarzhvskiy (2019)	"provide a mixture of digital communication and human communication at every touchpoint that is passed through in this journey" (PHB)
C1.6 Stakeholder dialogue formats	Deductive	The interviewee mentions dialogue strategies to communicate transparently with stakeholders	Cornelissen (2020), The Global PR and Communication Model 2021, Vernuccio (2014)	"there were several stakeholder dialogue formats implemented where Stakeholders were invited into the company and during the COVID-pandemic, it was fully virtually so it was digital, it was a digital stakeholder dialogue and then I would say social media is a way for more transparency and dialogue as well." (MSB)
C1.7 Learning by doing	Inductive	The interviewee explains how transparency is implemented by constantly learning new things		"But you need to be really agile and flexible because it is a world which is in constant move and you really need to adapt fast as well." (ASA)
C1.8 Information disclosure	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency is implemented by offering information		"That our journalists and our target group are getting their information at the same time in their preferred language." (Alexandra Landers)
C1.9 Show purpose & mission	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency is implemented by showing the corporate purpose & mission		"because transparency initially arises from the fact that a company does not close itself off, but participates in the digital world, so to speak, opens itself up, shows things and tells what this company is all about" (PHB).
C1.10 Morality	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency is implemented by being morally correct		"since we're talking about transparency, once this happens, it's important that a company immediately warns its customers of what has happened"(ASA)
C1.11 Overall integration	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how communication needs to be aligned and all employees need the same information / knowledge cross-departmental		"So normally we have a, for example, a Press Club for Germany, where we published the messages in German. But there is also a Press Club in place, for example, for Portugal, where the Portuguese colleagues are translating this information into their language and sharing the same information four their media (...) So I think this is one of our main transparency tools so that we can ensure and align our communications approach" (Alexandra Landers)
C1.12 Separation between Areas	Inductive	The interviewee differentiates between digital corporate communication, product communication, marketing and PR		"you need to differentiate between digital corporate communication, which is similar to marketing communication" (PHB)
C1.13 Walking the talk	Inductive	The interviewee explains the importance of putting the company's words into action		"we don't just want to say, yes, we're donating something to the schools and we'll give money so that they can build it. Instead, we said okay, we'll give them the wood storage units from our cars. So they have a driveway or I don't know what it's called. So power cuts in South Africa have always been a problem for schools. And at some point they went and said hey, we can take the batteries from our test cars or old cars that I think are coming back, because they're still good, and we'll install them somehow, so small ones in temporary storage units, and then we'll have some sort of plan for your school." (SSD)
C1.13.1 Give proof	Inductive	The interviewee explains the importance of showing proof of what the company is actively doing		"I think it's very important because our company is very preoccupied about that and we publish results every three months about our sustainability goals or about the sustainability goals that we have achieved". (DSM)
C1.14 Internal transparency	Inductive	The interviewee mentions the importance of transparency within the company		"transparency within the company is quite important as well" (MSB)

CATEGORIES / SUBCATEGORIES	Qualitative content analysis approach	DEFINITION / CODING RULE	SOURCE	ANCHOR EXAMPLE
C2 Importance of transparency in digital corporate communication	Deductive	The interviewee mentions the importance of transparency	Borden & Zhang (2023), Fombrun (2004), Jahansoozi (2006), Kim & Lee, 2018, Men & Hung-Baesecke (2015), Rawlins (2008)	"So also with regard to the topic of transparency, it is becoming increasingly important that the topic is kept high or that attention is paid to it, as I said at the beginning, otherwise it can lead to negative effects." (SSB)
C2.1 Crisis situation	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency is important in crisis situations	Coombs (2007), Utz et al. (2013)	"since we're talking about transparency, once this happens, it's important that a company immediately warns its customers of what has happened. And this is something which also needs to be addressed that people know." (ASA)
C2.2 Increasing demand	Deductive	The demand for transparency is very high	Berg & Feldner (2017), Cornelissen, 2020; Faria, 2023, Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Liu et al. (2023), Zerfaß et al., 2023	"because the diesel scandal has led to an interest in things and thus also a demand for more transparency from the industry that was not there before and that is a game changer" (Philipp Perwanger)
C2.3 High investment	Inductive	The interviewee mentions the importance of transparency in connection with the fact the purchase of cars is usually not made recklessly		"If you look at the products in the automotive industry that people are supposed to buy, then even if they are not in the premium segment, such as BMW or something else, they are generally value investments by private individuals, even in the case of volume brands such as Opel, Renault, VW, etc., which are very, very important and costly for the vast majority of people." (PHB)
C3 Digital corporate communication channels	Deductive	The interviewee talks about the general implementation of digital communication channels	Gomez-Vasquez, L., & Soto-Vélez, I. (2011), Unmetric (2019), Hofstätter et al. (2020), Infosys (2018), Svobodová et al. (2019)	"But if you say we're going to record lots of mini clips about this report, we're going to use them on Instagram and make infographics, we're going to add the head of sustainability, who will then give a short interview on LinkedIn and so on and so forth, that means the proactive use of the results or the content of such a report on digital channels, analog channels, they go on the radio with it, so all sorts of things." (Philipp Perwanger)
C3.1 Social Media Advantages	Deductive	The interviewee mentions the advantages of digital corporate communication channels (Websites, Social Media Channels, Corporate Blogs, Intranet etc.)	Cornelissen (2020), Marinović et al. (2022), Utz et al. (2013)	"social media are theoretically a very good thing, because they promote diversity of opinion, because they secure international opinions" (IRM)
C3.1.1 Access of information	Inductive			"One of the things that we've seen with the Internet is that people can access a lot of information these days." (ASA)
C3.1.2 Large online reach	Deductive	In order to reach a broader audience and to communicate in a fast way, social media has become a popular tool to communicate with stakeholders.	Cornelissen (2020) Utz et al. (2013)	"Yes, because with that digital conferences you can achieve a lot of more people." (DSM)
C3.1.3 Interaction / Two-way-communication	Deductive	The interviewee mentions as advantages of digital corporate communication channels the potential of interactivity / two-way information flow	Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015), Vernuccio (2014)	"Nowadays this has changed a lot and it changed into not being just One Direction communication, but two-way communication." (ASA)
C3.3 Social Media Channel Usage	Deductive	The interviewee mentions social media channels like, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter (X) used and, if applicable, the reason/their benefits	Unmetric (2019)	"we have the classic social media channels, i.e. LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube. There are different formats, so on Instagram of course reels and all feed posts, on YouTube both classic, long formats, i.e. 16 to 9 as well as reels or YouTube shorts" (SSB)
C3.3.1 Additional Social Media Channels	Inductive	It is disclosed which additional or own social media channels are used.		"So normally we might try to use our so called Press Club where we are publishing our press releases and this press releases will be published worldwide." (Alexandra Landers, Pos. 10)
C3.4 Social Media importance	Deductive	The interviewee explains the importance they attach to social media in terms of transparency	Oltarzhovskyi (2019), Petrosyan (2023),	"That's why social media is a very, very important and especially for digital corporate communication. So now the question is, what about transparency? This is a recurring theme, of course, social media can contribute to and support corporate communication or companies becoming transparent through their communication on these channels (...)." (PHB)
C3.4.1 Younger target group	Deductive	The younger target group tends to be more likely to be influenced by social media	Darshan (2018)	"And for the public, and especially younger target groups like students, young professionals, well, who grew up with an iPhone and an iPad and quite lots of electronic devices, they are currently a lot on social media. So, you can't negate that there is. There is no social media, you can just put aside." (Alexandra Landers)
C3.5 Corporate Website	Deductive	Company's websites are frequently used as digital communication channel in the automotive industry	Dahiya and Gayatri (2018), Köhler and Zerfass (2019)	"So I think mostly our websites, our social media, but mostly the websites because in social media we need to be careful." (DSM)
C3.6 Critical view	Deductive	The interviewee explains how digital communication channels can also have a negative impact	Keite (2019)	"Yes, because social media it's a world that is changing every day and I think we need to be careful not only with that but with the people that have a hateful thought inside, so not the ones that are genuinely criticizing, but people like to go to social media and to talk bad about everything." (DSM)
C3.6.1 Misinformation	Deductive	The interviewee mentions the challenge of misinformation (e.g fake news)	Wu et al. (2016)	"The big problem with social media is framing, because a lot of disinformation takes place via social channels" (PHB)
C3.6.2 Need to be careful	Inductive	The interviewee mentions the need to act carefully on digital corporate communication channels		"So I think social media is a strange world. A really strange world and you need to be careful because of that, and also because that feedback that we talked, that can put our company in danger? I don't know if danger is the best word but like it can put our company in "bad sheets"" (DSM)
C3.6.3 Can't hide	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how companies cannot hide online		"So when you have this amount of information available to everybody, you really it's not that companies are hiding, but you can't hide anymore. Everything is out there, so you need to be more and more transparent towards your public." (ASA)
C3.6.4 Non objective	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how people are not always objective online		"Not just because they don't like something. No, it's mostly because they say I don't like this because I just don't like it and that's my opinion. And yeah, that's my opinion, so deal with it." (DSM)
C3.7 Feedback	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how digital corporate communication channels offer the opportunity to give feedback		"social media communication, which, in contrast to pure sender communication i.e. one-way communication, you always get direct feedback from your users, which is why it's also called social media" (SSB)

CATEGORIES / SUBCATEGORIES	Qualitative content analysis approach	DEFINITION / CODING RULE	SOURCE	ANCHOR EXAMPLE
C4 Company reputation	Deductive	The interviewee gives his opinion about corporate reputation in connection with transparency	Baesecke (2015), DiStaso & Bortree (2012), Eck (2012), Fombrun & Foss (2001)	"And that in turn means that it benefits the company's reputation overall" (Philipp Perwanger)
C4.1 Negative Influence	Deductive	The interviewee mentions negative effects of being transparent regarding corporate reputation and also what a good reputation can negatively influence	Reilly & Hynan (2014)	"The issue or the challenge in digital corporate communication, especially in sensitive sectors such as the automotive industry, is that nowadays and even more so in the future, when we talk about trusting a good reputation and transparency, we are actually talking about very, very high-quality constructs that react very sensitively, also in their rash, but very sensitively, a lot can be destroyed very quickly and very slowly, very difficult, possibly only to be rebuilt"(PHB)
C4.1.1 Risks	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how being transparent can be a risk for the corporate reputation	Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies (2023), Reilly & Hynan (2014)	"And I think it's incredibly important in my opinion with a definition like this that you highlight this area of tension between particular interests and truthful communication, because in the end, of course, communication that is not truthful always carries the risk that your reputation, that a significant part of your particular interests, will be damaged (...)" (SSB)
C4.2 Positive influence	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how being transparent can have a positive effect on corporate reputation	Fombrun and Foss (2001), Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015), Protecting intangible assets: Preparing for a new reality (2020)	"Yes, but they do have added value, perhaps in terms of reputation, in terms of perception(...)" (Philipp Perwanger)
C5 Indication of product information	Deductive	The interviewee gives his opinion and importance about the indication of product information online and what kind of information	Cornelissen (2020), Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames (2019), Ko et al. (2018), Sodhi & Tang (2019), Xu et al. (2022)	"But at the same time, I don't think you can make the mistake of going into too much detail." (SSB)
C5.1 Complexity	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how indication product information is a complex process	Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies, 2023	"That was practically blind trust, both for the people working there and for all the products. Nowadays it's completely different, nowadays people question the products critically. Why? Because other values are enormously important to people and society, keywords such as keeping the world liveable for future generations, sustainability and fairness". (PHB)
C5.1.1 Sustainability	Deductive	Since focus on sustainability continues to increase, attention should also be paid to publishing this information.	Wellbrock et al. (2020)	"So it's not only about the product anymore, it's a 360 degree approach from let's say the strategy phase where we are already thinking about for example changing materials from let's say leather seats to sustainable materials. Not only let's say, substitutes, but perhaps also other materials we can use. So these are quite important things. Also, let's say reducing plastic using perhaps other materials you can better reduce or recycle." (Alexandra Landers)
C5.1.2 Supply chain	Deductive	Supply chain visibility is a prerequisite for providing supply chain transparency	Sodhi & Tang (2019)	"This means that the more transparency they show to the outside world in the supply chain, because that's the one point - ok, I have to have my supply chain under control. I have to make sure that I am compliant and fulfill all the laws, supply chain laws, everything that comes with it (...)" (Philipp Perwanger)
C5.2 Transparency goal	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how indication product information has transparency as the goal	Cornelissen (2020), Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames (2019), Tafesse & Wien (2017), Ko et al. (2018), Xu et al. (2022)	"we need very, very important transparency from companies, because the products are still the core of a company's business, in the case of cars for the automotive industry we need credible, transparent product information that is not advertising, that is no longer real or if it was before, but that is credibly authentic."(PHB)
C5.2.1 Information that is authentic	Inductive	The interviewee mentions the importance of authentic product information		"But you also need this authentic, in quotation marks, "corporate information" or whatever you want to call it, at the same level." (PHB)
C5.2.2 Information that is credible	Inductive	The interviewee mentions the importance of credible product information		"In other words, you are playing on a completely different keyboard, where you have to provide credible, transparent information that goes far beyond the product." (PHB)
C5.2.3 Information that is valid	Inductive	The interviewee mentions the importance of valid product information		"But I think it always depends on the topic, but of course the information has to be transparent as far as possible and of course it has to be valid." (SSB)
C5.3 Mandatory information	Deductive	Is it mandatory that the fuel consumption and CO2 emission are directly legible on a post	Von Der Osten (2019)	"Car manufacturers are obliged to provide a certain degree of transparency when it comes to product communication. That means that when they advertise their product and even when they do corporate communications about it, so if they are the CEO and they talk about the new VW Golf on LinkedIn then I think they have to provide certain transparency information in the short video or in the information when the vehicle is mentioned, I am pretty sure that they are obliged to provide certain transparency information. That means the fuel consumption, the CO2, the CO2 emission and so on."

CATEGORIES / SUBCATEGORIES	Qualitative content analysis approach	DEFINITION / CODING RULE	SOURCE	ANCHOR EXAMPLE
6 Publication of CSR reports	Deductive	General statements of the interviewees on the publication of CSR reports	Global Reporting Initiative (2023)	"So there are reports that you have to deliver in terms of transparency" (JRM)
C6.1 Greenwashing	Deductive	The selective disclosure of positive or false information about a company's environmental or social activities while withholding negative information about these issues	Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies (2023), Hoffhaus (2011), Delmas & Burbano (2011), Lyon & Maxwell (2011), Reilly & Hynan (2014)	"But does the report really mean that this problem has been solved? Or does it just address it?" (JRM)
C6.2 Transparent communication	Deductive	The interviewee mentions the need of transparent communication when publishing CSR reports	Cornelissen (2020), Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies (2023), Kim and Lee (2018), Liu et al. (2023)	"the two must work very closely together and interact with each other, because otherwise there will no longer be a shoe that is crucial, that what CSR does and communicates goes hand in hand with corporate communication and becomes transparent." (PHB)
C6.3 Importance CSR (Newest trend)	Deductive	It is not only the newest trend but also indispensable for companies to publish about sustainability values and how they intend to comply with them	Kaley (2019), Liu et al. (2023)+G69	"I would say the corporate sustainability report is the basis for further communication. On the first hand, I would say no one reads the corporate sustainability report because it is, I don't know, but 400 pages or something like this long and but it's the source of truth and the and a very valuable source for further responsibility communications via social media, via press releases, via dialogues and so on." (MSB)
C6.4 Sustainability	Deductive	Sustainability efforts are an integral part of a CSR report.	Paurova & Chlebkova (2020), Wellbrock et al. (2020)	"They transformed the sustainability report into an integrated corporate report and this is important because the key message behind is that sustainability is in the midst the company. It's nothing besides the company." (MSB)
C6.5 Corporate Behavior	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how the company's behaviour need to be coherent in integrating CSR across all compapny's activities	Paliderova et al., 2015; Paurova & Chlebkova, 2020; Wellbrock et al., 2020	"And this is something that it is already done within the company and more and more it will be done for the future and all of these messages we are completely transparent and not just saying, oh, we are going green, but we're not showing what we are doing and this is what we do with these reports. We try to show what is the path. How are we doing? How are we adapting? It will take years, of course, but it is a way..."(ASA)
C6.6 Mandatory	Deductive	Nowaydyas, legal regulations require companies to disclose relevant data about their activities to achieve transparency	Pichler & Lehner (2017)	"So it's worth it and it's really worth it while you have to do this because the European regulations oblige the companies to publish this report and I would say it's worth it" (MSB)
C6.7 Distribution channels	Deductive	The interviewee mentions where the automotive company publishes their CSR reports	Rolland & O'Keefe Bazzoni (2009)	"Yes, we do publish a corporate social responsibility report. We also publish it online. That means digitally only, just to reduce paper and every person is a able to download it and have a look at it." (Alexandra Landers)
C6.7.1 Publication on the Website	Deductive	Corporate websites have become important platforms for reporting on CSR activities		"they published it via the corporate website."(MSB)
C6.7.1.1 Attractive presentation	Inductive	The interviewee mentions the need for a visually attractive dissemination of CSR reports		"The second is that they translated it into a very hands-on and in a very in snackable content with lots of images and animations, Videos and texts, that are written in a way that everyone can understand them" (MSB)
C6.7.2 Social Media	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how use social media to communicate their CSR reports		"And fostered the communication via social media and so on." (MSB)
C6.8 Proactive communication	Inductive	The interviewee emphasizes the importance of actively initiating communication about CSR initiatives.		going to use them on Instagram and make infographics, we're going to add the head of sustainability, who will then give a short interview on LinkedIn and so on and so forth, that means the proactive use of the results or the content of such a report on digital channels, analog channels, they go on the radio with it, so all sorts of things. There is a really wide playing field. This means that if they are proactive, then the level of perceived transparency naturally increases." (Philipp Perwanger)
C6.9 Target group	Inductive	The interviewee mentions the target group CSR reports		now the question is always, who looks at such a report: the consumer, I don't think I know any consumers who look at it. So I can't imagine it. This means that these documents, whether it's the annual report, a sustainability report or a CSR report, are looked at by journalists, I think, and then perhaps the regulators, who are waiting for these reports to be looked at, and then of course the capital market. Let's say the capital market, if you have analysts who look at these things, because there are funds that act with a view to
C6.10 Strategy	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how CSR is or should be part of the corporate strategy		"CSR is a very important overall corporate, strategic issue nowadays and will have to be managed centrally and strategically in the future, as will corporate strategy" (PHB)
C6.11 Area of responsibility	Inductive	The interviewee mentions to which department CSR belongs to or where the responsibility is attributed to		"if a CSR area, as I said, is not part of corporate communication but instead is part of the human resources division, for example, that communication still is everywhere, which constitutes the CSR of this company. This would mean that it takes place in an integrated manner with corporate communication" (PHB)

CATEGORIES / SUBCATEGORIES	Qualitative content analysis approach	DEFINITION / CODING RULE	SOURCE	ANCHOR EXAMPLE
C7 Perceived transparency	Deductive	The interviewee mentions what influences the perception of transparency	(Holland et al., 2018),	"And have to click 5 or 10 times until you get there, then no matter how transparent the report is, it has no significance at all for the perceived transparency." (Philipp Perwanger)
C7.1 Influencer & Media Relations	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how companies work with influencers and other r	Tafesse & Wien (2017)	"and then of course there is also the possibility that we work with influencers." (SSB)
C7.2 Dialogue	Deductive	The interviewee emphasizes the importance of personal and direct communication with consumers	The Global PR and Communication Model (2021), Vernuccio (2014),	"dialogue is getting more and more important. The real dialogue between human beings, because we want communication that works between human beings, and this is the original way." (MSB)
C7.2.1 Access to information	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how access of information helps (in relation with influencers or journalists) can influence the perceived transparency		"Of course, they have excellent access. And I believe that if they do pure corporate communications, then it's about access to the company spokesperson, but also access to the management board. Can I talk to the CEO at the trade fair or at the company on the fringes of the event? How isolated is he? Can I fly with him when they fly to China or something? So this access for this little bubble of journalists." (Philipp Perwanger)
C8 Digital communication trends	Deductive	The interviewee mentions what he thinks are the current trends in digital corporate communications	ARD-ZDF Mass Communication Trends Study (2023), Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies (2023), Zerfuß et al. (2019)	"believe that the trend in the company will continue to be that digital channels will become more important and therefore transparency will also become increasingly important in this platform." (SSB)
C8.1 Artificial intelligence	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how artificial intelligence is taking over work processes	Zerfuß et al. (2023)	"That would be, of course, artificial intelligence. It is really turning everything around and I don't know exactly how what this pending image means, but it will turn everything around. It will be a revolution for the whole media landscape and so for the digital communications landscape as well." (MSB)
C8.1.1 ChatGPT	Deductive	The interviewee mentions ChatGPT as a tool of artificial intelligence	Zerfuß et al. (2023)	"I don't know how much they have to work on the text intensives when it comes to creating a sustainability report, when it comes to the annual report or the annual figures of the company or the quarterly figures of the company, everything that is connected with numbers and when you feed the artificial intelligence, the company's annual reports for the last 10 years, and then I'm sure that all you really have to do for the coming year is enter the figures and the chat GPT will probably create the annual report based on the last 10 annual reports, so that's a bit. I don't think I have to look that far into the future."
C8.1.2 Critical view	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how artificial intelligence also brings disadvantages and challenges or needs to be monitored more		"I think we definitely need some laws and regulations for the usage of artificial intelligence." (Alexandra Landers)
C8.2 Blockchain	Deductive	Blockchain technology offers cost reduction, enhanced transparency, and optimized supply chain management, serving as a platform for secure information.	Fraga-Lamas & Fernandez-Carames (2019), Ko et al. (2018), Xu et al. (2022)	"And I guess, also there is also the trend to give data-driven insights along the entire communicative workflow. And while I am taking about this, the next thing in connection with this would be the integration of emerging technologies. Which means a higher blockchain usage for transparency and security of communications." (FHP)
C8.3 Digitalization	Deductive	The interviewee mentions how digitalization (especially digital communication) is becoming even more important in the future	Corporate Excellence – Centre for Reputation Leadership & CANVAS Sustainable Strategies (2023)	"And another topic that I can already see is digitalization." (SSB)
C8.4 Digital data security	Inductive	The interviewee mentions that data security online must be considered more and more		"A challenge that I also see and I was just thinking about it because of artificial intelligence, and it's something that's here at the company, it's also a point that is very well taken care of is the digital security for data protection." (ASA)

CATEGORIES / SUBCATEGORIES	Qualitative content analysis approach	DEFINITION / CODING RULE	SOURCE	ANCHOR EXAMPLE
C9 Positive effects of transparency	Deductive	The interviewee explains why and how transparency influences positively the company besides corporate reputation		"That also has a component and that's why I would say it can have a lot of positive characteristics, but it can also be positive if you're not completely transparent at the beginning and then gradually create this transparency in order to take people with you over a longer period of time and not just bang everything out at once." (SSB)
C9.1 Good Reputation	Deductive	The perceived transparency of the company has a positive influence on corporate reputation	Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015), Fombrun and Foss (2001)	"Then I want my corporate communication to be digital nowadays, so to speak, with different people, we also call them stakeholders, we want to achieve certain things and they would like to trust, so that reputation or credibility or something else can be achieved. And transparency is a very important building block for building or expanding such centrally important constructs such as trust, reputation, etc., which are important for people." (PHB)
C9.2 Success	Deductive	Transparency has a positive influence on automotive company's success	Eck (2012), Suck et al. (2022)	"So one thing is clear: nowadays, a company will no longer be successful in terms of communication, or will not be successful in the future, if its communication is not transparent, including its digital communication." (PHB)
C9.3 Credibility	Deductive	Transparency can improve the credibility of a company	Adeline et al. (2012), Matei et al. (2015)	"I also wanted to mention credibility, that was another concern of mine. So I think in case of doubt, transparent corporate communication increases credibility." (Philipp Perwanger)
C9.4 Trust	Deductive	Transparency of actions and regularly sharing information through platforms such as blogs and social media can enhance stakeholder trust	Eck (2012), Pichler et al. (2021)	"transparency leads to more trust and trust is the most valuable currency in my ways when we're talking about communication and stakeholder management." (MSB)
C9.5 More valuable	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency can add more value		"And one thing that we want, I think it's one of the things that we want the most, is that our brand becomes the most valuable and has the best perception in the market. So in that point of view, I think it helps a lot." (DSM)
C9.6 Positive brand perception	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency influences positively the brand image		"The perception of our brand becomes better." (DSM)
C9.7 Good employee / competition	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency leads to be a better employer and proves itself against the competition		"I believe that this is good and that is, that is also necessary I believe in the fight for talent in competition" (Philipp Perwanger)
C9.8 Orientation & Security	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency provides a feeling of orientation or security		"Transparency gives people orientation". (PHB)
C9.9 Loyalty	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency creates loyalty.		"This openness reassures consumers that the company is reliable and ethical, leading to increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth." (FHP)
C9.10 Crisis management	Inductive	The interviewee mentions helps manage crisis situations better.		"Further, transparency also helps mitigate the impact of negative events, as consumers are more likely to forgive mistakes if they believe the company is being forthright and responsible." (FHP)
C10 Future perspectives	Deductive	Statements in which the interviewee talk about the future of transparency and digital communication in the automotive industry.		
C10.1 More personal communication	Inductive	It is mentioned how personal communication is still important future.		"The real dialogue between human beings, because we want communication that works between human beings, and this is the original way." (MSB, Pos.32)
C10.2 More non-traditional communication	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how non-traditional communication ways should be implemented more.		"We need to think about something really different in the area of corporate communication, because nowadays, we do the basic things; we make statements, we send the press release with the statements from the important people in the company and of course we show numbers, and that kind of stuff is important. But it's always the same format. And here at Mercedes, we are trying to make it more revolutionary." (DSM, Pos. 93)
C10.3 Social Media Challenges	Inductive	The interviewee draws attention to the fact that social media will continue to pose a number of challenges in the future		"but I think it's a Social channel that will cause us problems in the future." (DSM, Pos.78)
C10.4 E-Mobility	Inductive	"The interviewee mentions that e-mobility is part of the future of the automotive industry.		"electromobility or sustainability are getting more and more important on the global level." (Alexandra Landers, Pos.14)
C10.5 Sustainability	Inductive	"The interviewee mentions that sustainability is part of the future of the automotive industry.		"Sustainability will also become more important in the future" (SBB, Pos.75)
C10.6 Transparency	Inductive	The interviewee draws attention to the fact that transparency in general will be important in the future.		"because transparency is what people are looking for today and will be looking for much , much more in the future." (PHB, Pos.47)

CATEGORIES / SUBCATEGORIES	Qualitative content analysis approach	DEFINITION / CODING RULE	SOURCE	ANCHOR EXAMPLE
C11 Critical view of transparency	Deductive	Statements in which the interviewee explains why transparency also brings challenges and can have negative effects	Christensen and Cornelissen (2015), Thøger Christensen (2002), Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2016)	"Precisely because you already anticipate, and we do that too, and I'm sure many others do. What is the demand and how should I respond to it? And sometimes you just can't, so if you are transparent, then this answer won't be satisfactory either for the user or for yourself, because these are simply topics that you don't want to make public." (SSB)
C11.1 View matter	Deductive	Transparency is in the eye of the beholder and can therefore be viewed differently	Thøger Christensen (2002)	"So transparency in digital corporate communication actually means different perspectives, one perspective is, so to speak, how transparent is digital corporate communication in the company? Then the second perspective is how transparent is the company's digital communication in terms of internal and external content, i.e. the transparency is the content that someone offers (...)" (PHB)
C11.2 Complexity	Deductive	As Ball (2009) states, transparency can be seen as a complex instrument of good governance in programs, policies, organizations, and nations	Ball (2009), Baraibar-Diez & Odriozola (2015)	"That doesn't mean that I don't think it's good to be transparent in a private relationship, I'm just much more aware of how much more complicated it is in complex systems and that transparency could be used to create supposed security and to delegate responsibility away from oneself so that someone else has it." (JRM)
C11.3 Diesel Scandal	Deductive	The interview mentions the biggest greenwashing scandal in the automotive industry until today (the VW Diesel scandal)	& Van Der Linde (2022), Jung & Sharon (2019), Wolff et al. (2022)	"I believe that you can be accused of mistakes in an environment, and we have now seen this with the diesel scandal, where there are also accusations of a lack of transparency (...)" (JRM)
C11.4 Challenges of transparency	Deductive	The interviewee explains why implementing transparency is a challenge	Thøger Christensen (2002)	"So I believe that companies are facing a challenge, especially automotive companies, which are actually viewed much, much more critically these days than they were 30 or 40 years ago, when they talked about BMW or Mercedes or any other car brand, it was "best of". That was practically blind trust, both for the people working there and for all the products. Nowadays it's completely different, nowadays people question the products critically. Why? Because other values are enormously important to people and society."
C11.4.1 Required responsiveness	Inductive	Statements in which the interviewee states that prompt and effective responses from companies are expected online.		And then, real-time communication requires companies to respond quickly and efficiently to requests and specific situations. That can also be a challenge. (FHP)
C11.4.2 Become more vulnerable	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparency leads to greater vulnerability		"and you can do that, but it also carries a certain risk, and I think the BMW case shows that a little bit, if you can take a look, because then of course you become more vulnerable if something isn't right. (Philipp Perwanger)
C11.4.3 Information overload	Inductive	The interviewee mentions how transparent digital corporate communication can lead to an overload of information.		"In the digital era, transparent corporate communication faces several challenges. Well, firstly, the huge amount of information available leads to an overload of information." (FHP)
C11.5 Pseudo-transparency	Deductive	be understood as a set of strategic measures that companies use	Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2016)	"Yes, I was and have often been part of company statements. In very many cases, it was more about finding the one that makes the company appear in the best light, without directly telling the untruth but also without directly telling the truth." (JRM)

CATEGORIES / SUBCATEGORIES	Qualitative content analysis approach	DEFINITION / CODING RULE	SOURCE	ANCHOR EXAMPLE
C12 Definition of transparency in digital corporate communication	Deductive	All statements in which the interviewee attempts to define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication.	Rawlins (2009); Luoma-aho & Badham (2023), Taiminen (2015)	"transparency in digital corporate communication is when the content and the way in which this content is communicated is authentic, relevant and true." (PHB)
C12.1 Honesty	Deductive	Statements where transparency is associated with the need for honesty	Adeline et al. (2012), Berg & Feldner (2017)	"So in all these areas, transparency plays a role and then you can see very clearly whether they are honest or not" (Philipp Perwanger)
C12.2 Disclosure of information	Deductive	Statements where transparency is associated with providing information	land et al. (2018), Vaccaro and Madsen (2009), Vujnovic & Kr	"transparency is to get, let's say, the same information, out to the public at the same time, to all people" (Alexandra Landers)
C12.3 Communication efforts	Deductive	Statements about the importance of measures to pass on comprehensive information, make an effort to participate in a dialog with stakeholders.	Rawlins (2009), Vaccaro and Madsen (2009)	"It's important to show results, numbers and proof in order to have the trust of your customers and clients, all stakeholders." (DSM)
C12.4 Openness	Deductive	The interviewee explains the need for the promotion of openness	Adeline et al. (2012); Ball (2009); Rawlins (2009)	"because transparency initially arises from the fact that a company does not close itself off, but participates in the digital world, so to speak, opens itself up, shows things and tells what this company is all about. First of all, this creates a basic transparency, i.e. it does not close itself off to an open world (...)" (PHB)
C12.5 Feedback	Deductive	The possibility for feedback to be received, accepted and implemented plays a big role when it comes transparency	Taiminen et al. (2015)	"I'm saying that we are empowering people to also give us feedback so we can be a better brand". (ASA)
C12.6 Truth	Deductive	Transparency necessitates truthful information	Adeline et al. (2012), Berg and Feldner (2017), Rawlins (2009)	"And I think it's incredibly important in my opinion with a definition like this that you highlight this area of tension between particular interests and truthful communication (SSB)
C12.7 Accessibility	Inductive	Statements about how being transparent online makes companies more reachable, understandable, or available to people.		"company becomes more approachable, more tangible and more understandable" (Philipp Perwanger)
C12.8 Relevance	Inductive	The interviewee explains the need for the communication to be relevant to the stakeholders		"Well in my opinion transparency in digital corporate communication is when the content and the way in which this content is communicated is authentic, relevant and true" (PHB)
C12.9 Authenticity	Inductive	The interviewee explains the need for the communication to be authentic to the stakeholders		"transparency work in social and digital corporate communication means transparent, authentic, professional communication work via your own channels" (PHB)
C12.10 Own channels	Inductive	Statements where transparency is associated with the use of own corporate digital channels		"Especially as we broadcast on social media and can choose what topics we place, we're not forced to talk about everything." (SSB)
C12.11 Reputation Management	Inductive	The interviewee mentions that image cultivation and self-positioning is a fundamental aspect of transparency		"that transparency has to be part of this basic interest of image cultivation and self-positioning of the company"(SSB)

Note. Own illustration based on Mayring (2000).

Appendix K: Transcripts

1	Expert interview SSB - (translated from German into English)
2	15. March 2024, 03:09PM
3	27 Min. 42 Sec.
4	
5	<p>Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:04</p> <p>Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry. This interview is going to be semi-structured, which means that I have about eight open questions, however additional questions are also possible if a more detailed answer is needed. I would start with a personal question. Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later?"</p>
6	<p>SSB 0:42</p> <p>Yes, I am 29 years old.</p>
7	<p>Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:43</p> <p>Super and could please also briefly introduce yourself and your function in your company? For instance, what are your daily responsibilities and tasks?</p>
8	<p>SSB 0:53</p> <p>This is actually mainly the management of campaign productions, for example when new vehicles are presented or corporate topics such as the opening of a new factory or simply corporate topics beyond the product. If there are communication occasions on social media, then the management and production of the assets, and then also the playout and evaluation. In fact, the whole process of social media communication and corporate.</p>
9	<p>Lara Cardoso Nunes 1:30</p> <p>Okay, thank you. Then I would also start directly with my main questions. How has transparency been implemented into your digital corporate communication strategies?</p>
10	<p>SSB 1:45</p> <p>Of course, it depends on how you want to define transparency, but of course, I think it's especially important in digital communication or social media communication,</p>

which, in contrast to pure sender communication, i.e. one-way communication, you always get direct feedback from your users, which is why it's also called social media. You can tell if you're not as transparent as possible or if you give the impression that you're not being transparent. Then you get a backlash very quickly and quickly get negative feedback, so to speak, which of course in the worst case scenario, perhaps even if there is paid media behind it, i.e. additional budget and an additional expansion of the target groups, then very quickly leads to a shitstorm, perhaps not necessarily, but at least to very negative sentiment on the posts and in the worst case, of course, the shitstorm. Which in turn might also damage your reputation, which would then really be the absolute worst-case scenario, which now rarely happens or hopefully won't happen.

11 **SSB** 3:00

Okay, yes that's true. The feedback possibilities due to the dialog format are definitely particularly high with social media.

12 Which online channels does your company use to get in touch with stakeholders?

13 **SSB** 3:17

There is, of course, the website, so I'm just talking about corporate, not the brand.

14 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 3:23

Ja.

15 **SSB** 3:24

Of course, there is also the corporate website with a news section, so I'm going to say the one where articles on various topics are regularly posted, including as part of campaigns.

16 Then, of course, we have the classic social media channels, i.e. LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube.

17 There are different formats, so on Instagram of course reels and all feed posts, on YouTube both classic, long formats, i.e. 16 to 9 as well as reels or YouTube shorts, and then of course there is also the possibility that we work with influencers. So as peers who carry out our topics and messages, and for me that's a bit of a part of the website, SEA is Search Engine Activation, so if you google company XY plus the topic, for example sustainability, it doesn't matter, or corporate citizenship, you come up higher in the ads on Google. That is, of course, or can also be a way of bringing people to the website. Sometimes we also call this an extra channel.

18 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:44

Okay, interesting. Then I would go over to the second question, which is all about corporate reputation, and I would like to know what influence you think the level of transparency of digital communication has on the perception of a company's reputation, especially among consumers, but also other stakeholders?

19 **SSB** 5:01

So I would first answer that the overriding question is whether digital communication has an influence on it and then transparency is part of this communication.

20 Of course it has an influence. Hopefully, otherwise we wouldn't be doing this.

21 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 5:30

Yes.

22 **SSB** 5:32

Yes, to what extent does that have an influence?

23 I would say, and I don't have any proof of this, but my personal assessment at this point would perhaps be that transparency is a factor that has to be - it always has to be, as I outlined at the beginning. Whenever you are not transparent and it is noticeable, then that is of course negative.

24 However, I maintain or dare to maintain that it would never happen that someone would say that everything is super transparent, so I think that is the case and there is a positive benefit to the reputation, I rather believe that this is a factor that must be in order to avoid negative effects, so it must be anchored somewhere in the basic understanding. But I don't believe that you actively gain anything with it, at least in the perception of the users. I'm just going to say that.

25 So I think it's necessary and it's important, but I don't think it helps to build a reputation. There are other things about the topics that you have to come up with, but it's generally important to avoid negative feedback.

26 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 6:39

So it's like a kind of basic requirement.

27 Okay, but then you rate the importance of transparency very highly in terms of perception.

28 **SSB** 6:56

Yes, yes, exactly.

- 29 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 6:59
And if you now look at the product information, to what extent does the detailed product information contribute to the perception of transparency?
- 30 So is transparency a positive thing or is too much information a bad thing?
- 31 Do you have an opinion on this?
- 32 **SSB** 7:19
What do you mean by the product information, can you give me an example?
- 33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 7:23
Yes, so in this case in the automotive industry on social media, information about the cars themselves is communicated to the users.
- 34 So how much they consume and other information, for example about the supply chain or the sustainability of the supply chain.
- 35 **SSB**7:36
Yes, that's important, of course.
- 36 So there are things that have to be there.
- 37 For example, the consumption data, which is very simple, because the car is recognizable as soon as the engine is recognizable.
- 38 And we know the model variant quite simply, right down to the disclaimer with the consumption values that we include. There have been new guidelines on this since the beginning of the year. This is now becoming more and more precise.
- 39 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 8:11
Ok.
- 40 **SSB** 8:12
I don't think we do that now, because we think someone will be happy if it says down there in small white letters, ah yes, [the vehicle] consumes so and so many kilowatt hours of electricity, I don't think we do that because of the reason. But of course, if the whole thing is topic-centered, we try to place the topics and that's also for example about sustainability.
- 41 Of course, it's also about transparency or when we talk about the supply chain and say yes, by the way, we only use recycled aluminum rims of 70% or a hundred, whatever, that is of course information. But I think it always depends on the topic,

but of course the information has to be transparent as far as possible and of course it has to be valid.

42 But at the same time, I don't think you can make the mistake of going into too much detail.

43 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:08
Can you elaborate on that?

44 **SSB** 9:08
I'm not so much concerned with sustainability issues, but with software issues, i.e. digital issues quite often.

45 Because of the social media logic, we have to make a relatively simple statement. You don't have the space, or the user wouldn't read through it, if you wrote 10 paragraphs about exactly in which vehicle it works and in which it doesn't, because depending on what software versions are in the vehicles or which operating system they run with, it can of course be that certain digital topics that we communicate work in one vehicle but perhaps not in another. And you can't create transparency here, because that would no longer be understood out there and would also raise more questions as to why this is actually the case, although it probably has some internal development reasons. I don't even know that myself and that's why you can't communicate so transparently because it simply wouldn't be understandable.

46 Some things are simply too complex, I'd say, to communicate them as transparently as might be possible.

47 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 10:05
Yes, you're probably right. Good point.

48 **SSB** 10:16
The next thing is, of course, that you don't want some things to be so transparent, so that's clear. At that moment, we place a topic and when we place a topic, we also choose what we want to talk about and place the message.

49 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 10:36
And to what extent does the publication, because we also talked about sustainability and corporate social responsibility often comes up in this context. In your opinion, to what extent does the publication of reports on corporate social responsibility contribute to the perceived transparency of the company?

50 **SSB** 11:05
There are always good studies on the reputation of companies, and the companies

themselves are certainly not the only company, I don't know the results of these studies in detail, but I think I know from conversations when we talk about corporate social responsibility that it does make a positive contribution to perception.

51 Sometimes more than other topics. So I would say that it is definitely an important topic.

52 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 11:41

And how does your company implement CSR in digital communication?

53 **SSB** 11:51

Well, that actually always happens via the topics, although I have to say that we always try to create a company reference. So what I'm trying to say is that any company can go and I'm exaggerating, say I want to plant 5,000 trees now at the latest and maybe communicate something about it.

54 But then the legitimate question is, okay and why are you doing this now?

55 Apart from the fact that you want to look good? So you know, the calculation is quickly seen through or is relatively shallow. And these are things, I would say, if I think about the past, what we have communicated in recent months, when we have communicated CSR in the online media, we have always communicated it in such a way that we can tell the story about why we are doing this.

56 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 12:25

So what are the goals behind it?

57 **SSB** 12:48

For example, in the past few months, I think it was in December, you can also take a look. It was very much about our social responsibility in South Africa. We had a whole campaign about it on social media, which my colleague did, and we always said OK, we don't just want to say, yes, we'll donate something to the schools and we'll give money so that they can build it. Instead, we said okay, we'll give them the wood storage units from our cars. So they have a dridlock or I don't know what it's called. So power cuts in South Africa have always been a problem for schools. And at some point they went and said hey, we can take the batteries from our test cars or old cars that I think are coming back, because they're still good, and we'll install them somehow, so small ones in temporary storage units, and then you'll have permanent power for your schools.

58 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:35

Ah cool!.

59 **SSB** 13:39

That's something else, so I can somehow say, hey, watch out, we have expertise in this topic of high-voltage storage and we have expertise in how you could use it and that's what we're doing to help you, and in my opinion that's also more credible and better than simply saying yes, we'll build you a school building now because we need something for our proof of donation.

60 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:00

Yes, according to the motto, just because you have to do it.

61 **SSB** 14:10

Exactly, because you simply have to. And if you can establish a corporate connection, i.e. why are we doing this now and why is it good that we are doing this and why can we make a positive contribution?

62 Then I think that's always better than just doing CSR for CSR's sake.

63 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:20

Absolutely. Okay, then we've already reached the quasi final question of the main section, which is about the positive effects of transparent digital communication. Which ones come to mind?

64 **SSB** 14:40

Yes, so the one thing I said. I believe that a positive effect is not a negative effect in this case.

65 On the other hand, I do believe that transparency also helps to ensure that the messages are better understood.

66 On the other hand, as I said, the exact opposite can also be the case.

67 Too much transparency can also be overwhelming.

68 That's why I think you always have to strike the right balance and see how much transparency makes sense so that people outside understand it and also how much transparency do we want to afford at all?

69 Because sometimes you don't want to, not because you want to hide something, but sometimes you consciously want to build up a topic, for example on social media for a while, yes, you don't count everything at the beginning. In terms of strategy and orchestration, you don't want to tell people at the beginning about a topic, for

example a vehicle, what it might be able to do in two years' time, because then you might get questions, such as why not until two years from now. You also want to build up the story a bit and that's why it's perhaps not always wise from a strategic point of view to tell everything about a topic completely transparently at the beginning. That also has a component and that's why I would say it can have a lot of positive characteristics, but it can also be positive if you're not completely transparent at the beginning and then gradually create this transparency in order to take people with you over a longer period of time and not just bang everything out at once.

70 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:21

Thank you very much. You've actually already mentioned some current challenges that I wanted to ask you about. But I would also be interested to know in general terms what trends you see for the future of corporate communication, especially digital communication?

71 **SSB** 16:26

So also with regard to the topic of transparency, it is becoming increasingly important that the topic is kept high or that attention is paid to it, as I said at the beginning, otherwise it can lead to negative effects.

72 I also believe that the danger in quotation marks, or rather the risk of something happening if you are not transparent enough, is there quickly or is getting there faster and faster and I believe it will be there even faster in the future because I think the focus will increasingly shift towards digital communication in the coming years. I don't think that will go away any time soon.

Even if you take a look at the internal distribution of resources within the company. There used to be a lot of press communication, so there is still a lot of press communication and that's right. So what I also mean is that, normally, a press release controls your message very well, i.e. what you put out there and you don't have a direct platform that is also visible to the public for third parties, where several people then question it and say they see it differently? I believe that the trend in the company will continue to be that digital channels will become more important and therefore transparency will also become increasingly important in this platform.

73 And another topic that I can already see is digitalization. These topics are very complex and I also believe that the topic of supply chains will become increasingly complex.

- 74 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 18:23
Yes.
- 75 **SSB** 18:25
Sustainability will also become more important in the future and that is also a complex issue. From that point of view, I would say that transparency in communication or dealing with transparency, as I said, it's always a question of how transparent can and do you want to be?
- 76 But how you deal with it, the right way, will become increasingly important. That doesn't necessarily mean that everything will become more and more transparent, but at least you have to deal with it more and more.
- 77 Should I be transparent now or should I be as transparent as possible or not and for what reasons not and I think that will become more important.
- 78 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 19:03
Always be prepared for queries, so to speak. So what we had at the beginning. The dialog option on social media, where you can also ask questions more quickly when you post something, so you actually always get direct feedback.
- 79 **SSB** 19:18
Exactly, and in some cases it is quite simply the case that we do not communicate certain topics, i.e. a topic that could theoretically be communicated, for example software topics, because we simply fear that there will be a demand and then of course we cannot leave this demand uncommented with community management, but of course we want to respond to it. That's why we are on social media, to interact with our target groups. But if the answer we have to give is because we want to be transparent, then yes, we want the truth to be told, which is the basic principle anyway and has to be clear anyway. But if you then actually have to go into detail in the answer and explain why this is not possible but next year it will only be possible with these and these models if you bought them in this and this market and after the start of production in this and this month and with this and this factory. The user is there and then you don't communicate the topic at all, at least not actively, so you decide not to place the topic.
- 80 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 20:25
Yes, in the end the disclosure is filtered, so to speak, and what is then communicated is tried to be communicated as transparently as possible, but what exactly is filtered first.

81 **SSB** 20:46

Precisely because you already anticipate, and we do that too, and I'm sure many others do. What is the demand and how should I respond to it? And sometimes you just can't, so if you are transparent, then this answer won't be satisfactory either for the user or for yourself, because these are simply topics that you don't want to make public. Yes, then it can also be that you think to yourself why is it so complicated? So they're not doing something right, why is it so over engineered? Partly perhaps also from this complicated explanation. For example, that things don't work in a vehicle that is 2 years old, even though it was expensive and cost a lot of money. But now it only works in vehicles that are a year and a half old, unfortunately not in yours, because unfortunately you have the old processor in it, where it doesn't work or something and that's just difficult to communicate and you don't want that either, because that could be another factor that could be negative and you can just say well, no, then we won't communicate the topic like that.

82 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 21:54

I have one final question.

83 I would be interested to know how you would define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication.

84 **SSB** 22:09

I need to think for a moment. Getting to the point is not that easy.

85 It's definitely very complex and in a way, of course, you have to say that transparency in corporate communications has to be defined differently to transparency in journalism, for example. After all, we have a vested interest and journalism, for example, should ideally not be. And that's the level we're operating at right now, so it's public relations, i.e. public relations work, i.e. corporate communication is part of it, so of course we won't communicate anything that could actively harm us, i.e. we won't try to harm ourselves with transparency in communication.

86 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 24:01

Yes, definitely.

87 **SSB** 24:12

That's why I think it has to be included in this definition, that transparency has to be part of this basic interest of image cultivation and self-positioning of the company. It's utopian, so to speak, to apply the same standards and transparency as in journalism or politics. Of course, a company has a legitimate interest in portraying

itself positively to the outside world and transparency must of course always be balanced between I want to present myself positively, but I must also not lie. And I think it's incredibly important in my opinion with a definition like this that you highlight this area of tension between particular interests and truthful communication, because in the end, of course, communication that is not truthful always carries the risk that your reputation, that a significant part of your particular interests, will be damaged, that your corporate communication will be damaged and I would say that transparency in this area of tension, so to speak, is to make maximum use of it, to come as close as possible to true, absolutely transparent communication and to communicate the largest possible amount of information of a topic to the public, understandable, comprehensible and comprehensive manner. But in some cases you probably won't get to one hundred percent, that won't work in this field of tension and that's okay and it has nothing to do with untruthfulness or anything else in communication. Especially as we broadcast on social media and can choose what topics we place, we're not forced to talk about everything.

88 So those are the points that are important, I think.

89 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 26:40

Yes, there were definitely some important keywords in there.

90 Thank you very much.

1	Expert interview PHB- (translated from German into English)
2	21. March 2024, 03:00PM
3	37 Min. 56 Sec.
4	
5	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:10
6	Thank you very much for taking the time to answer my questions about digital corporate communications in the German automotive industry. This interview will be semi-structured, meaning I have about 8 open-ended questions, but are additional questions possible if a more detailed answer is desired? This interview will be semi-structured, i.e. I have about 8 open questions, but additional questions are possible if a more detailed answer is desired.
7	I'll start with the personal question. Could you please tell me your age so that I can do the demographic analysis later?
8	PHB 0:41 59.
9	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:46 Perfect, thank you very much. Could you briefly introduce yourself, what your functions in the company are and what your daily responsibilities are?
10	PHB 0:47 I'm basically at the University of Hohenheim, where I have a professorship for strategic corporate communications and am mainly responsible for topics such as, data-driven communication, so we're already moving in the right direction of digital corporate communications and otherwise also very strongly in communication management. I also work as a consultant in corporate communications for a large German car manufacturer, so the two complement each other well.
11	Lara Cardoso Nunes 1:38 Thank you very much. Then I'll actually start directly with my main question, which is about the implementation of digital corporate communication. In your opinion, how is transparency best implemented in digital corporate communication?

12 **PHB** 1:39

So transparency in digital corporate communication actually means different perspectives, one perspective is, so to speak, how transparent is digital corporate communication in the company?

13 Then the second perspective is how transparent is the company's digital communication in terms of internal and external content, i.e. the transparency is the content that someone offers. And the third perspective is, of course, how do you ensure transparency in the discussion? I think this has recently been added, i.e. how do you ensure the corresponding transparency in increasingly AI-supported digital corporate communication? What used to be exclusively human-produced, so to speak, and what will now perhaps be a hybrid of human-produced and AI-produced in the future.

14 And I believe that the topic of transparency in digital corporate communication is initially a very relevant topic for all three perspectives, a very current and very important topic in the future. Why? Because if we now go one level above that, i.e. the strategic view, then transparency in digital corporate communication is a very, very, very, very, very central component because digital corporate communication eliminates various things that were largely directly or indirectly implicit in personalized, non-digital communication from person to person and thus ensured transparency. So you no longer have human-to-human contact, but everything is very much digital, as I said, and when AI is added, it becomes even more impersonal.

15 In other words, people are social beings and if you now think from the end of the chain, so to speak, and say yes, why am I actually doing corporate communication? And digital corporate communication?

16 Then I want my corporate communication to be digital nowadays, so to speak, with different people, we also call them stakeholders, we want to achieve certain things and they would like to trust, so that reputation or credibility or something else can be achieved. And transparency is a very important building block for building or expanding such centrally important constructs such as trust, reputation, etc., which are important for people. No one trusts anyone or any company if they don't have a high degree of transparency about what that person is like and what they do for that company, and that is the challenge par excellence in the digital world today and therefore also in digital corporate communication. As a survival construct for successful companies in the digital cosmos, trust and credibility are extremely important to me with people and at the same time, digital communication greatly minimizes this necessary transparency per se through the digital, and accordingly I

have to actively do something to create transparency and that is why the topic is so important.

17 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 5:56

And how would you describe how they tried to achieve this, especially when you were working in the automotive industry? So this transparency?

18 **PHB** 6:15

So the findings say that this now applies to the automotive industry. But it also applies to other industries. But you're writing about the automotive industry, so we'll stick with that. If you look at the products in the automotive industry that people are supposed to buy, then even if they are not in the premium segment, such as BMW or something else, they are generally value investments by private individuals, even in the case of volume brands such as Opel, Renault, VW, etc., which are very, very important and costly for the vast majority of people. Very few people somehow shake this out of their pocket. So that means that these people in the automotive industry have to have a lot of trust in the companies they want to buy products from and therefore these companies have to be very, very, very transparent, and of course you can achieve that in the automotive industry by going and saying, okay, you need to differentiate between digital corporate communication, which is similar to marketing communication. But let's stick with corporate communication for a moment, you have to be completely digital in the topic journey, in the communication journey, in the communication process of a company with its various stakeholder groups, and it's all good, so you have to provide a mixture of digital communication and human communication at every touchpoint that is passed through in this journey. I think that if I really want to create transparency, it's not enough to make everything transparent, to disclose everything so that people can say, "My God, that's transparent." Instead, transparency in people's perception arises when companies show and communicate what they are doing, why they are doing what and how, in other words, very strong transparency communication that contributes to transparency as a company. And the second thing, of course, is that I have to keep looking for every stakeholder journey, which, in addition to communicative touchpoints, also ensures contact between people, i.e. companies in the form of people, and the respective stakeholders, because only then does this issue arise. Through transparency, generated trust and that cannot be replaced digitally.

19 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:02

That's right. But as you know, of course, social networks are becoming increasingly important for establishing a dialog between the company and users or stakeholders.

What importance do you now ascribe to these social networks in terms of transparency?

20 **PHB** 9:25

So social networks have a high significance for companies in the automotive industry, for example, but also for everyone else.

21 We are on a cross-industry journey here, meaning that we have a centralized, even more centralized communication channel for interacting with people and engaging in dialogue and exchange, or for reaching people, because they are increasingly reaching more and more people via very specific communication, such as social media channels. No longer via the one big article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung that everyone read 20 years ago. That's why social media is a very, very important and central building block for corporate communication and especially for digital corporate communication. So now the question is, what about transparency? This is a recurring theme, of course, social media can contribute to and support corporate communication or companies becoming transparent through their communication on these channels, because transparency initially arises from the fact that a company does not close itself off, but participates in the digital world, so to speak, opens itself up, shows things and tells what this company is all about. First of all, this creates a basic transparency, i.e. it does not close itself off to an open world. People who can use these social channels can see this, they can perceive it, they can take part in it and participate in it, which means that there is of course a module that contributes to transparency. Social channels are probably even much, much more promising for such transparency due to their technical possibilities than perhaps other communication via press releases or something else. So why in this form? Because the technical possibilities are simply manifold. I can interact, I can communicate directly with the company. It is the possibility of interaction, as both sides are interested in interacting with each other or with each other. I have a wide range of options for communicating the content of events via social channels, i.e. live events, infographics, images, films, texts, in other words the entire spectrum of content preparation is actually available to me in social media, including the equally important option of interaction. The big problem with social media is framing, because a lot of disinformation takes place via social channels.

22 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 12:42

Yes, interesting. Can you elaborate on that?

23 **PHB** 12:49

Yes, and first of all, for the channels in general, i.e. for the social platform in

general, you have the major handicap that this mistrust, which may be disinformation and which does not severely restrict transparent communication work via these channels. I wouldn't say it prevents it, but it does restrict it. You can also see it in the Edelman Trust Barometer studies, which are published every year, so you can see a lot, but one key finding that has remained relatively stable over the years, with high significance, one percentage point more or less, but always with the same high significance. It is actually that people say that we trust social platforms above all else, especially those that are from the companies themselves, and of course, if we stay with your question, you have the opportunity to say Ok, transparency work in social and digital corporate communication means transparent, authentic, professional communication work via your own channels and then especially, of course, via your own channels and not only in terms of quality, but also in terms of quantity, that you use them more than you have done so far.

24 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:27

Thank you very much, that answers my questions very, very well. That brings us to the second question, which you have already addressed? It's about the reputation of a company. You had already said that you believe that transparency can also have an impact on a company's reputation? Do you think that it is always positive in digital corporate communication or can it also have negative effects?

25 **PHB** 15:30

The issue or the challenge in digital corporate communication, especially in sensitive sectors such as the automotive industry, is that nowadays and even more so in the future, when we talk about trusting a good reputation and transparency, we are actually talking about very, very high-quality constructs that react very sensitively, also in their rash, but very sensitively, a lot can be destroyed very quickly and very slowly, very difficult, possibly only to be rebuilt.

26 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:10

Yes.

27 **PHB** 16:27

In other words, transparency that can contribute to a good reputation or that is important for the good reputation of an automotive company, is a very fragile structure, just like the good reputation itself or the trust and digital corporate communication. In my opinion, I believe that this will become worse due to the black box of artificial intelligence, as I said, not for the experts, perhaps even for them, but for the many people who use this digital corporate communication of an automobile manufacturer, but who are normal people in quotation marks, who are of

course completely overwhelmed by what AI will make possible on these social or digital channels.

28 And I believe that artificial intelligence is a very big factor and a very big challenge for digital corporate communication, that it can actually have a positive effect in these sensitive constructs of transparency, good reputation and trust. So the degree to which digital corporate communication will have a positive impact in terms of transparency and reputation is definitely there, but it's a very small degree.

29 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:53

Mhm. I didn't find that much about artificial intelligence in my literature research, but I might have to read up on that again, in connection with transparency.

30 **PHB**

31 This is not yet so transparent in many companies, but if you look at artificial intelligence and corporate communications, then the focus in corporate communications and also in digital communications is not on this level of impact, but on efficiency or quality.

32 I can write better texts in a short time and I have the people who do the communication, other resources free for other things or as a last resort for these texts or for other things that are produced with AI.

33 This means that in the vast majority of corporate communications at automotive companies and other companies, the focus on artificial intelligence is very much at this operational level. Which processes can be automated? Where can time be saved, where can quality be increased through AI in communication products? Very few people are currently thinking about the effects that what is produced as a result, or what artificial intelligence basically does to us humans via all the digital channels, has on what corporate communication or digital communication actually wants to achieve with its stakeholders. Very few people think about what AI is changing and it is precisely these thoughts that play a role.

34 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 19:33

Yes, that's right. That's a very interesting topic.

35 But then I would like to move on to the next question and I would like to know your opinion on how the provision of detailed product information contributes to the perception of transparency, i.e. how does it contribute to this?

36 **PHB** 19:54

So I believe that companies are facing a challenge, especially automotive

companies, which are actually viewed much, much more critically these days than they were 30 or 40 years ago, when they talked about BMW or Mercedes or any other car brand, it was "best of". That was practically blind trust, both for the people working there and for all the products. Nowadays it's completely different, nowadays people question the products critically. Why? Because other values are enormously important to people and society, keywords such as keeping the world liveable for future generations, sustainability and fairness.

- 37 The perception of an economy that is no longer oriented towards shareholder value, but a neo-economy that also treats the world's resources with care, so to speak, a choice between profit maximization and what is good for a society and a company, or a world, and in this context it is important for companies that, on the one hand, they are naturally still bought because of products or a company's products are bought.
- 38 No company is being bought, but products are being bought, and more and more fields of activity are also emerging for companies in the automotive industry. You need talent, there are significantly more jobs than talent, the transformation from traditional drives to electromobility is creating a high need for investment, which means that there is a need for people to invest in companies in automotive companies, to invest their money there and so on, we need very, very important transparency from companies, because the products are still the core of a company's business, in the case of cars for the automotive industry we need credible, transparent product information that is not advertising, that is no longer real or if it was before, but that is credibly authentic. But you also need this authentic, in quotation marks, "corporate information" or whatever you want to call it, at the same level. In the area of employer branding, human resources, corporate sustainability, investment information that companies disclose to companies. In other words, you are playing on a completely different keyboard, where you have to provide credible, transparent information that goes far beyond the product. Brace yourself, but the product is still the most important thing of all.
- 39 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 23:37
 Yes, so not just products, but thinking even further ahead, and you have actually already hinted at the fourth question, as I also wanted to know what your opinion is on the publication of reports on corporate social responsibility. Corporate social responsibility is currently a very hotly debated topic, which can also influence a company's transparency. And I also wanted to know your opinion on this, but you have more or less already teased it out briefly.

40 **PHB** 24:16

So social responsibility or corporate social responsibility, as you always want to call it, is of course a very important topic for companies, but also for society as a whole.

- 41 It is ultimately important for society or for companies in particular because it has become so enormously important for society and for our coexistence and that companies can no longer just focus on profit maximization and their business side, but that the company is just as important and corporate players are those who have a social responsibility. Corporate actors are those who have a social responsibility, not only to employ people and pay good wages, but also to go beyond this, and this is of course an area in which many people automatically attach a great deal to a company and its nature, if you want to call it that, in terms of human history, and transparency in these areas is of course extremely important. So you clearly have the issue that you are not in the same boat, i.e. you are in the same department, that CSR communication or CSR and its communication is already prescribed in corporate communication? This is very different in companies, but in any case, the two must work very closely together and interact with each other, because otherwise there will no longer be a shoe that is crucial, that what CSR does and communicates goes hand in hand with corporate communication and becomes transparent. Do you have a problem with CSR and therefore how credible is the transparency of CSR? Do you have the problem at the moment at least that many companies want to communicate CSR activities in the context of other important topics, i.e. you often see very intensive communication of sustainability and social responsibility topics in digital corporate communication, for example from car manufacturers, of ESG and just so and now you actually have to say they are three different things that only have a limited connection with each other, but they are all somehow perceived together by the public because ESG just means the economic as well as the social aspect, which brings us to corporate social responsibility, which in turn also indirectly or directly includes sustainability in ESG topics. There is now also a definition of E as environmental and no longer as economic or vice versa, so there is a mixture there. What I'm getting at is that with all these issues, which are very important for society and for our lives, they are very important for corporate communication in order to make companies appear trustworthy and transparent. That there is actually a very, very great potential for companies to achieve very, very positive things through transparency in the areas of social responsibility, i.e. CSR. However, they are tainted by the communication of sustainability issues, because sustainability issues are viewed and scrutinized very critically, especially in the automotive industry, and of course we are in a world that is not just 0 and 1, but

is complex. There are currently still enough black sheep who are demonstrably doing greenwashing sustainability communication. In other words, they actually have a very, very critical humanity or society in all these sustainability issues at the moment, which is more likely to say that this is greenwashing than that they are prepared to believe what is communicated about sustainability issues, to take this transparency seriously and, in my perception, this is currently having a strong impact on CSR issues, especially in the automotive industry, although it actually has nothing to do with it at all.

42 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 29:24

I do completely agree with you. Can you remember how your previous company in the automotive industry integrated CSR into its corporate communications, especially in digital communications?

43 **PHB** 29:45

So we are in the automotive industry, there are actually 2 models and they are both common. There are actually some automotive companies that say that CSR as a whole is so important that it is a separate area. This means that it is usually or often located in the Human Resources department because it is about social responsibility in the broadest sense.

44 This means that if they have such a construct, then they often have the issue that corporate communication in such companies does not have anything directly to do with CSR and CSR communication. This means that in such constellations, CSR communication does not take place exclusively, but also via the self-sufficient CSR area. That's great, I think, because communication functions don't all have to be integrated with each other, but they should act in an integrated way externally and internally. So that means that it is at least important, if a CSR area, as I said, is not part of corporate communication but instead is part of the human resources division, for example, that communication still is everywhere, which constitutes the CSR of this company. This would mean that it takes place in an integrated manner with corporate communication, i.e. at eye level, that one does not say something and the other says something else, but that the communication effect to the outside world takes place in an integrated manner. In the automotive industry, you also have the constellation that CSR is very much about different, i.e. in its content, not in what you communicate, but what you do as a company in CSR. This is very strong in various areas, mostly in Human Resources. That's why communication is completely above that, i.e. CSR communication is very strongly or completely part of corporate communication, and therefore has an advantage. As a result, everything that takes place in terms of communication is lumped together.

The disadvantage of this is, of course, that such decentralized support for an important overall topic in terms of corporate strategy, namely CSR, is somewhat suboptimal. Because if different departments are involved in the various sub-segments of CSR, one department is responsible for social responsibility on site, the other for corporate social responsibility and the third for social responsibility for our environment. In that case, it's not a one-stop shop, but rather three or more players who address a major topic in a decentralized manner.

45 That can work, but in my view, sustainability CSR is a very important overall corporate, strategic issue nowadays and will have to be managed centrally and strategically in the future, as will corporate strategy, and communication should ideally be part of the company's communication function.

46 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 33:34

Thank you, I've actually already come to the last questions. You've actually already answered them for me from time to time, but I would like to ask again that I would like to know what you think are the positive effects of transparent digital corporate communication? You already mentioned trust and credibility, but can you think of any other positive effects?

47 **PHB** 34:04

So one thing is clear: nowadays, a company will no longer be successful in terms of communication, or will not be successful in the future, if its communication is not transparent, including its digital communication. This means that everything we communicate digitally, as a company that has to create transparency, must be included in every single communication measure in every single piece of content that we generate or convey, because transparency is what people are looking for today and will be looking for much, much more in the future. That's why it's very simple, but it's just as difficult, because transparency gives people orientation. It provides security and insights. Which is completely disappearing in our digital cosmos or in the digital world and that is why transparent digital corporate communication is a very big lever for corporate communication in order to generate a lot of positive things for the people you want or need to reach as a company and, of course, for these people to see it as a help because they perceive it as a relief - these are all very emotional effects that arise from transparent communication in the digital sphere. Of course, they have a much more powerful effect than when they operate on a rational level, okay?

48 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 36:05

Okay. At the end, I like to ask all my interview partners how they would define

transparency in the context of digital corporate communication, i.e. whether they manage to summarize it in one sentence? It's not that easy.

49 **PHB** 36:37

Well in my opinion transparency in digital corporate communication is when the content and the way in which this content is communicated is authentic, relevant and true.

50 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 37:11

Oh wow, perfect, that works! Thank you very much. I'll finish the recording here.

1	Expert interview Philipp Perwanger - (translated from German into English)
2	27. March 2024, 09:03AM
3	44 Min. 18 Sec.
4	
5	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:04 Yes great, thank you very much for taking the time to answer my questions about transparent communication and digital corporate communication in the German automotive industry.
6	This interview will be partly structured, which means that I have about 8 open questions, but additional questions are also possible if I somehow feel that I need a more detailed answer. I would start with 2 personal questions, namely can you introduce yourself very briefly.
7	So what is your role in your current company?
8	Philipp Perwanger 0:44 Yes, my name is Philipp Perwanger, I am 41 years old and I am a Director at the Brunswick Group. Brunswick Group is a global consultancy for corporate communications, specializing in special situations, but also everything to do with corporate communications and strategic corporate communications. I've been in the profession for over 15 years and yes, I think that was the most important thing.
9	Lara Cardoso Nunes 1:23 Do you also work with automotive companies in your everyday life?
10	Philipp Perwanger 1:27 Yes, so can I talk about that. The automotive industry is my hobbyhorse, which means I'm part of the automotive team at the Brunswick Group.
11	Lara Cardoso Nunes 1:39 Mhm.
12	Philipp Perwanger 1:40 And even before, there were sector-specific teams or industry-specific teams, I did a lot for the automotive sector at Brunswick and that means that we advise both the supplier industry, i.e. T1, T2 and T3 suppliers, but also the OEMs, i.e. on a global

level, which can then be a company such as a foreign car manufacturer, as well as all the Germans.

13 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 2:18

Thank you very much, then I'll start directly with my questions, namely how you think transparency should be integrated into the digital corporate communication of automotive companies?

14 **Philipp Perwanger** 2:32

Transparency should perhaps have to be defined again or the common understanding of transparency can always be discussed.

I think that's important. Is there perhaps a line to be drawn between marketing and product communication and corporate communication?

15 I don't know if they do around them, yes, but I think that makes sense in this case.

16 I believe that the automobile is a highly emotional product, and because it is a highly emotional product, product communication and the product are usually at the forefront of communication, and my experience is that after consulting with many car manufacturers, some of whom like to go the Apple way and say that the product is the main focus for us. Let's take product communication, which is more important and much more superficial, and corporate communication, which is often linked to board members and people, which is important, but not as important as the product, so the product is the most important thing and how the product is perceived, and that's a bit like the path that Apple follows, so that's one thing, but it's different for a supplier.

So because a supplier tends to rely more on B to B communication, I say, and is not necessarily in the public interest, because the product, so to speak, if you build in the car door or if you supply cables somewhere, then you don't have a product that reaches the end consumer, so I think these are all factors that I thought about at the beginning and that may have an impact on transparency.

One more important point. Car manufacturers are obliged to provide a certain degree of transparency when it comes to product communication. That means that when they advertise their product and even when they do corporate communications about it, so if they are the CEO and they talk about the new VW Golf on LinkedIn, then I think they have to provide certain transparency information in the short video or in the information when the vehicle is mentioned, I am pretty sure that they are obliged to provide certain transparency information. That means the fuel consumption, the Co2, the Co2 emissions and so on.

17 Lara Cardoso Nunes 5:20

That is correct.

18 Philipp Perwanger 5:23

And even if they are car dealers and so on, so whenever it comes to the product, they have a certain duty of transparency. These are all things that I can think of off the top of my head, but I think I would define transparency that goes beyond that in corporate communications as follows. This is really about classic corporate communication, perhaps also independent of the product linked to the Management Board and the transparency it can demonstrate. Again, this is also related differently to the various bubbles.

19 I think it's important these days. I think it brings added value if you have digital corporate communications and thus automatically become more transparent, because if you go into the limelight as a board member and show a presence on LinkedIn, then the process of having greater transparency automatically begins than if you are a company that does not do this and say we only run the clip on LinkedIn or on Instagram about the product. Yes, BMW Freude am Fahren, the car whizzes around the corner and somehow you hear a speaker say a relatively product funny text versus I am the Board Member for Human Resources at Volkswagen and I give insights on LinkedIn into how we are now dealing with the savings program or how we retain employees or how we deal with diversity and I believe that this is good and that is, that is also necessary I believe in the fight for talent in competition and also in the fight for reputation publicly in public perception, that you show this transparency, so to speak, so you see it is relatively complex and yes.

20 Lara Cardoso Nunes 7:23

You have actually already started a bridge to the next topic, which is actually all connected to corporate reputation. I wanted to know what you think the level of transparency of digital corporate communication is, whether you think it has a positive effect or what impact it can have on consumers' perception of the company's reputation.

21 Philipp Perwanger 7:39

Yes, that's a good question, but I can answer it purely subjectively, you'd have to take studies, so you'd really have to check, because I think you can say for both purely subjectively: is Apple successful? Yes. Is BMW successful? Yes, BMW certainly has the approach in the automotive industry that the product is in the foreground, yes, that's their idea. They will see less on LinkedIn, i.e. classic personal and corporate communication-heavy like corporate communication on

linkedin or other profiles, because the product is more in the foreground than others. That's why I believe that I am a product. Purely in terms of sales and success and the image the product has, especially with an emotional product like a car. I would have to say, subjectively, that product marketing and product communication have a much higher relevance because they buy the car, not because the board of directors says something great on linkedin, but because they have an emotional connection with the product, and that's also the case when a Chinese manufacturer launches on the German market today and the product is convincing, is highly emotional, the product communication is right, the sales are right, the trade is right, the price is right. Then I think it's more important for the pure sales and monetary aspect than whether it's the Chinese board of directors or whether the company is doing traditional corporate communications. That's why you have to ask yourself who can afford this corporate communication and in which markets does it take place? And of course it takes place much more strongly in the German domestic market of a German premium manufacturer, while in other markets of the so an expert in our company for the US market once told me that there is actually no German car manufacturer in the United States that does corporate communications in the true sense, there is no such thing, because these are import brands and this is an import market for the German manufacturer. And of course there will perhaps be an interview with a German board member that will then go to the capital market or something like that.

But basically it's all about product communication about a Porsche, a BMW. It's about how do I position the product?

- 22 And from my perspective, that has very little to do with transparency in corporate communications. Nevertheless, they are successful, so the question is, of course, when a crisis occurs or when a company's reputation is tarnished and when it comes to all the things that don't revolve around the product, i.e. am I attractive as an employer, do I have to cut jobs, do I have to build up jobs, do I have to look for skilled workers? Especially in software in the IT sector. I'm always under extremely close scrutiny in my home market - yes, the VW Group, the journalists write about it every day, you could say. That's why I have to operate transparent corporate communications, whether digital or analog, in a highly professional manner, because it's part of it.

- 23 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 11:50
Because the demand is there.

Philipp Perwanger 12:08

Yes, the demand is there in the domestic market and it's about all the topics that are perhaps not linked to the product on the one hand and then of course there are the regional aspects if you have plants, if you have a plant with 50,000 people. If you are an employer in Lower Saxony with over a hundred thousand people, then you have to communicate digitally with the regional media on Facebook', on linkedin, because you are part of society there and you don't just sell your car through dealers and you don't just have to appeal to the end consumer. So in all these areas, transparency plays a role and then you can see very clearly whether they are honest or not.

24 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 12:25

Very good. I'll just go on then.

25 First of all, I think they also reflect what I found in my research, so even in academic research, the focus is on product communication and less on corporate communication in the automotive industry online, so they also confirm the results that I came to. But I would actually like to go a bit further now, because I want to ask a few more questions.

26 **Philipp Perwanger** 13:31

Yes, gladly

27 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:45

To what extent do you think the provision of detailed product information contributes to the perception of transparency? By detailed product information, not only the CO2 consumption, but also supply chain transparency and everything that has to do with the production of this product. How do you feel about communicating this information online, so to speak?

28 **Philipp Perwanger** 14:15

That's a very good question and an important aspect. What comes to mind is a practical example. BMW was recently the subject of public criticism because, I think, it's about a supplier from Morocco? I'm not sure, maybe you know the topic and otherwise please google it, that might help you because it's a good white. A good example is I don't quite have it in mind, and that was exactly about this topic. Whether a supplier fulfills the BMW criteria, so to speak, and the exciting thing was, if you look at the case, is that BMW is or was actually considered a pioneer in corporate communications, but also in product communications, and also very transparent, but as soon as they open up and go on the offensive here, they also have to deliver.

They said we need, please check this again I don't have the details in front of me,

we don't need any rare earths or very few, and we pay attention to where the metal comes from or where the raw materials for the battery come from and pay a lot of attention to that. So they've gone on the offensive here and been very transparent in their corporate communication and product communication as far as their suppliers are concerned and the use of materials with regard to sustainability and all these criteria, and of course when there were now problems with one supplier and that seems to have happened, the interest was all the greater in the media because then the tone, I say or so it was, can BMW keep its promise in this regard at all? This means that the more transparency they show to the outside world in the supply chain, because that's the one point - ok, I have to have my supply chain under control. I have to make sure that I am compliant and fulfill all the laws, supply chain laws, everything that comes with it. The second question is, do I communicate this to the outside world and use it in corporate communications, and that is your question about transparency. And you can do that, but it also carries a certain risk, and I think the BMW case shows that a little bit, if you can take a look, because then of course you become more vulnerable if something isn't right. I believe that the best solution from my point of view is for corporate communications to have an extremely broad base within the company. It has to think strategically about all these risks and risk factors and it therefore has to dock onto all these departments. It needs the information and it must be prepared in case of doubt, and it must not stand on the sidelines and simply be perceived as a mouthpiece, where people in the company say yes, corporate communications, I actually only need it for the employee letter and nice little pictures, and it is the role of corporate communications, so to speak, to dock in there, to think along, to be strategic, to be prepared and then perhaps to make these decisions at board level. That's why I believe it's a strategic decision that the corporate communications function in the company has to make with the Management Board and it has to be carefully considered because, in case of doubt, they don't have any added value for the sale of the product. Yes, but they do have added value, perhaps in terms of reputation, in terms of perception, but they are also taking a risk because if they can't keep these promises, i.e. keyword sustainability report, how offensively do I use something like this, what is my supply chain like? Can I even deliver what I have in mind? And that's the key question for me, and in the end I'll tell you, and the current situation shows this very well. You can see the jolt, i.e. how difficult it is for e-mobility, if all the subsidies are chosen, then the product is e-mobility, so does the market carry this on its own or does it only run via subsidies?

29 That's the controversial issue right now and I believe that in the end the consumer, we see it now, when there is inflation, i.e. when all prices rise. Yes, the consumer quickly forgets about sustainability and there may be a very small percentage who say I'll buy the electric BMW and not the electric car from China, because they have a better way with rare earths, BMW goes a better way, or at least I know they don't get it from the mine where I have no idea who works there and I don't think many people make a purchase decision on this basis and yes, that's my conclusion. So the bottom line is that corporate communications has to be very closely involved and think strategically about all these issues and then you have to make fundamental decisions with the Management Board. Do I want this level of transparency proactively or do I just need to prepare for it reactively and that would be my conclusion yes.

30 **Lara Cardoso Nunes**

31 Thank you. My next question would be, how does the publication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports contribute to the perceived transparency of your company?

32 **Philipp Perwanger** 22:04

So you have to think about the bubble in which the publication of a CSR report takes place. Again, I think the example of BMW. I think BMW was one of the first to have its own sustainability report and they had their own communication function for sustainability and later, that was a few years ago and then they started to merge the sustainability report with the annual report, which in my view also makes sense. Now the question is always, who looks at such a report? The consumer, I don't think I know any consumers who look at it. So I can't imagine it. This means that these documents, whether it's the annual report, a sustainability report or a CSR report, are looked at by journalists, I think, and then perhaps the regulators, who are waiting for these reports to be looked at, and then of course the capital market. Let's say the capital market, if you have analysts who look at these things, because there are funds that act with a view to sustainability and so on, so for investors, for the capital market, for journalists, these things are important, perhaps also for politics, if we look at the party landscape. And that's why I have to say that this is also a bubble, the whole I don't think it plays a role for the consumer, but I don't think it's decisive for the perceived transparency of a company, but the perceived transparency of a company depends more on the frequency of proactive communication. In other words, if you make this report and you leave it on the website under 5. And have to click 5 or 10 times until you get there, then no matter

how transparent the report is, it has no significance at all for the perceived transparency. But if you say we're going to record lots of mini clips about this report, then we're going to use them on Instagram and make infographics, we're going to add the head of sustainability, who will then give a short interview on LinkedIn and so on and so forth, that means the proactive use of the results or the content of such a report on digital channels, analog channels, they go on the radio with it, so all sorts of things. There is a really wide playing field. This means that if they are proactive, then the level of perceived transparency naturally increases. In my opinion, the report alone is far too passive to increase the perceived transparency of the company.

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 25:45

Then I'll just ask the next question before the internet gives up again - what do you think are the positive effects of transparent, digital corporate communication in general? In other words, what positive effects can transparency have in the digital world or digital communication of a company? I can give you an example. In science, transparency is strongly associated with building trust.

34 **Philipp Perwanger** 26:23

So I see 2 points, the first point is I think that the diesel scandal was a tipping point, so that was a turning point, that was a game changer for the automotive industry, because the diesel scandal has led to an interest in things and thus also a demand for more transparency from the industry that was not there before and that is a game changer, which I think must or should be in your work, because a lot of transparency is related to it.

35 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 27:05

Yes, definitely.

36 **Philipp Perwanger** 27:08

So then we have these issues, then we now have nitrogen oxide emissions. We also have a technological demand for transparency or yes, how is the exhausted gas cleaned? How does it work with diesel? Yes, these are issues that have come to the public's attention, which up to this point were unimaginable, I would say, or non-existent. That's one thing, and I think the diesel scandal has increased the demand for transparency to an unimaginable extent. On the other hand, the industry has also presented it in such a way that the industry is perceived as having something to hide, that we are an industry that is not interested in transparency. We are an industry that perhaps cheats, that does not take this very seriously and that, in cooperation with the authorities, especially in Germany, where they like to turn a

blind eye and the Germans around Deutsche Umwelthilfe with their lawsuits, Deutsche Umwelthilfe with their actionism and also with their communication, go to court by suing cities and air pollution control plans, yes, what are the values set by the EU? Do the German cities comply with the values and so on and so forth. And how much nitrogen oxide does a German diesel emit? I think that was an unprecedented wave of demands for transparency and data and things, and in the end it shone a light on the industry. We don't want this transparency at all. We've avoided it so far, we have great cars. Sorry, if I put it like that and everything like yes or or... But we also said we have the cleanest diesel, we went to America and said the cleanest diesel with very low CO2 and very low emissions and that just collapsed and I have to come back to your question, which I have to look at again because I talk so much. That's why there were actually no positive effects. On the contrary, the whole thing was initially a negative effect and almost portrayed the industry as deceivers, as tricksters and as someone who has no interest in transparency, so that was the first development, now with the launch of e-mobility and all these issues and after the question of possible sustainability, yes, how sustainable is a 2.5-ton car with a huge battery that is produced under questionable conditions? So, there are doubts among consumers and I think transparency is important to dispel these doubts, yes, but in the end, and I said this earlier, in the end it is relevant to a certain extent and then it stops being relevant when people can no longer afford it, yes, it's like food and then and then it hits again and becomes relevant again. And I believe that today they have to operate a mix of highly emotional product communication and transparent corporate communication, which pays a lot of attention to why the industry contributes to prosperity. What role does VW play in society when it is one of the largest employers and provides for so many people and families in Germany and ensures prosperity and so on and so forth? And why is the VW perhaps more expensive?

- 37 Yes, because we still manufacture it here in Germany, but it's not just the consumer who benefits, society benefits and that can also be applied to supply chains, to legalities, to all these issues. How is the car more sustainable? In the second case also in production and so on and so forth, and incidentally this is already happening. So if I've been reading Automotorsport for 25 years and Automotorsport is an important consumer medium and in the final evaluation of the vehicle it is now also looked at is the vehicle produced in the USA and does it then have to be sent here? What materials are used and so on? So people are looking at this sustainability aspect, which means we have to become more transparent here too, because journalists, and therefore the public, are keeping a closer eye on how it influences

purchasing decisions, I can't tell them.

38 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 32:22

Thank you, now a question about digital corporate communication, which has nothing to do with the automotive industry. What trends do you see emerging in digital corporate communications in the future?

39 **Philipp Perwanger** 32:41

Yes, I'd love to, I forgot one more point with the other.

40 You said trustworthiness and I also wanted to mention credibility, that was another concern of mine. So I think in case of doubt, transparent corporate communication increases credibility.

41 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 32:48

Yes, that's very good, that's a good point.

42 **Philipp Perwanger** 32:54

And that's why the keyword was important to me and the example of BMW or others also shows that they have to be able to deliver in case of doubt, because otherwise, by opening up, they become vulnerable and the credibility, which must then also be sustainable, I say, and that's why they have to communicate strategically and not selectively, but really maintain it.

43 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 33:24

Can you please further elaborate on that? I find it very interesting.

44 **Philipp Perwanger** 33:32

Yes, and you have to be consistent and this opening up that you are doing has to be sustainable, otherwise it won't work. The trends in digital corporate communication are very clear and you will have heard this a hundred times? And artificial intelligence, someone said to me the other day Ah, I'm also doing self-marketing now and I'm LinkedIn, I have to become a brand myself as a person, for my career, but all these posts that I make via Chat GPT or that an artificial intelligence makes for me like this and that, I found that very amazing. And perhaps the bottom line is that artificial intelligence in corporate communications is on the rise.

I don't know how much they have to work on the text themselves when it comes to creating a sustainability report, when it comes to the annual report or the annual figures of the company or the quarterly figures of the company, everything that is connected with numbers and when you feed the artificial intelligence, the company's annual reports for the last 10 years, and then I'm sure that all you really have to do

for the coming year is enter the figures and the chat GPT will probably create the annual report based on the last 10 annual reports, so that's a bit, I don't think I have to look that far into the future. But if, as someone told me, they can feed artificial intelligence with what they actually need, then the result will of course be extremely accurate. So now I imagine that we will see an increase in the use of artificial intelligence and I believe that this will probably be put to good use in this sustainability issue in particular. The question I ask myself here is about credibility and trust. Will the public notice this or not? And will there be subtle differences and risks and will credibility be higher? I can't estimate that yet and I haven't personally worked with it enough to be able to say I really see a difference, but that's why I believe the increase in artificial intelligence, especially in the area of corporate communications, is something we'll see a lot of and also in visual communications. It's also about video now, I've only read that if you look at the creative industry and you can probably feed an artificial intelligence with it and then you get the super clip for the latest vehicle from manufacturer XYZ and you only need to feed the artificial intelligence with this data and then you get nice results. Maybe it's just a tool? Maybe you understand this is just a new tool?

45 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 37:03

Yes.

46 **Philipp Perwanger** 37:04

And that has no influence on whether they write the press release themselves or make the clip themselves, i.e. who does it. That's probably the status quo for now

47 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 37:18

...the consumer doesn't care.

48 **Philipp Perwanger** 37:24

Yes, and as things stand today, it probably doesn't matter when it comes to perceived transparency. The important thing is probably that they do something, that they open up and that they communicate this to everyone at all. What other trends are there? From a personal point of view, I could also imagine that in favor of product communication in the automotive industry or with the products, that is probably more like perhaps a little less corporate communication, perhaps also less access to the company and that is more product-heavy. Because perceived transparency is also important, by the way, because where is transparency perceived? If you are a FAZ journalist or any other journalist, yes, they sometimes tell me in confidence that the company has this really great thing, I can call them every day and have a company spokesperson on the line and he talks to me in the

background and gives me exclusive information and so on and so forth and immediately and that is a perceived transparency with the journalist, which is of course reflected in their reporting and then again with the people out there.

49 There aren't that many people who read the FAZ if they really look at the whole crowd in Germany and that increases the perceived transparency, but transparency then depends on corporate communication and that really doesn't mean marketing or product communication, but corporate communication is strongly related to how the respective bubble accesses the company. If you are now a YouTuber and you do the CarCrash Review. There are so many of them now and they are being taken around the world all the time to introduce them to the new models. Of course, they have excellent access. And I believe that if they do pure corporate communications, then it's about access to the company spokesperson, but also access to the management board. Can I talk to the CEO at the trade fair or at the company on the fringes of the event? How isolated is he? Can I fly with him when they fly to China or something? So this access for this little bubble of journalists.

50 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 40:02
Access to information in the end.

51 **Philipp Perwanger** 40:10
Exactly, but this takes place on a very personal level.

52 So I think it's still about who can I call and who can I talk to?

53 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 40:14
Yes.

54 **Philipp Perwanger** 40:18
And I don't think that can be replaced so quickly by artificial intelligence, and that's exactly what access is, so for me the decisive factor here is yes.

55 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 40:25
Yes, that's true. Definitely. Thank you very much. I have another small challenge, which I give to all my interviewees.

56 Do you think you could briefly define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication in one or two sentences, in other words, your own definition? I know it's a bit difficult to come up with something like that directly, maybe, but would you just like to give it a try?

57 **Philipp Perwanger** 42:10

58 Of course, I will try to add a clever sentence from me, I can of course, otherwise put it in writing, but I'll give it a try. In my view, transparency in times of digital corporate communication increases the connection or bond between the public and the company, which means that a company becomes more approachable, more tangible and more understandable. And that in turn means that it benefits the company's reputation overall.

59 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 43:19

Mhm perfect. I will then take the terms that have been mentioned the most from the various definitions that have been given to me and then try to philosophize or put together my own definition. I'll stop the recording..

1 **Expert interview JR (translated from German into English) - Phone Call**

2 21. March 2024, 03:09PM

3 50 Min. 42 Sec.

4 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

5 *The beginning of the phone call was deleted from this transcript*

6 You have asked me to illustrate the relevance of my thesis topic. So firstly, it is important to build a good relationship between employees, to build a support system. Transparency or better transparent communication has already been proven to build trust or create trust. And, of course, to influence reputation in a positive sense, i.e. the company's reputation. These are at least some of the hypotheses that I have put forward based on the literature I have read and which I would now like to explore further with my interviews and research. This topic is especially interesting in the automotive industry. That is why I am interested in talking to you.

7 **JRM:**

8 If you assume a personal relationship with trust and, for example, where you are transparent with your partner, where you don't withdraw, don't argue, don't do anything, then it is perfectly appropriate to build trust. That seems very logical. When it comes to companies or complex issues such as supply chains, this is much more challenging. Because a supply chain can go on for three months and five different suppliers and relate to countries that have a little difficulty in terms of transparency. Do you think it's basically the same, just with a little more effort or do you say there are aspects to it, well, let them prove that they are transparent so that we, who are looking at it from the outside, have a better feeling? Would you see it the same way?

9 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

10 I think it's a very difficult topic, which is why I found it so interesting. Especially in terms of supply chains. I think it's very complicated, but I also think it's very important to communicate it as simply as possible so that there are no misunderstandings and to only ever give as much information as the consumer can process, but I do believe that as much information as possible should be given in order to build up a basis of trust and to give the impression that you know what's going on behind the scenes and that it's being communicated transparently.

11 **JRM:**

12 I think that's good and right, and I've said that personally, I think it's great. However, I've been working in the automotive industry for so long that at the end of the day I ask myself: is that the case? Is it really presented that way? And doesn't it often used as a placebo? I believe that you can be accused of mistakes in an environment, and we have now seen this with the diesel scandal, where there are also accusations of a lack of transparency, and there is a Mercedes manager who

was sentenced to 262 years in prison. He was sentenced more harshly for the diesel scandal than if he had killed 36 people. And there has been a lot of talk about this diesel scandal and the transparency requirement and all the things that should have been explained, but the real cause lies much earlier, in other words with people who work in companies where people really want to be transparent and/or ask questions that people don't worry about until much later. The diesel scandal started many years before the scandal, with people in the companies making decisions that for some reason later became unsustainable. And that's a mixture of things that were indeed unsustainable because they were morally wrong, we'll talk about that later, whether morally wrong, and to justify because others looked at these things later and didn't want to admit their own mistakes in these things, and so they always said it was the others' fault. If they had done it right, there wouldn't have been this scandal. What everyone remembers is that the auto industry committed terrible crimes, and that's probably true, some things had gone wrong, or at least immoral behavior. What the rest of the world has not understood is that this has been used politically and has been used by many institutions, such as the KV Bundestamt, to absolve themselves of their own mistakes and that it has been used by courts to convict companies for things that were not criminal at the time they occurred. So this is the first time that the issue of transparency has taken on a dimension, through the publicity and the fact that no one wanted to be guilty of anything, that I had never experienced before in my life. People were also accused of things they had done that were not even punishable when they did them. Imagine, and I'll give you an extreme example. You live in a country where murder is not punishable, and it comes out 5 years later, the law has changed so that something that was not even a law 5 years ago, you are now convicted. So the shutdown devices that we know today were absolutely unpunishable at the time they were made, because nobody knew about them and Volkswagen actually made them. So there was no law in Europe that prohibited shutdowns, and yet managers and companies were penalized for carrying out shutdowns even though they were not prohibited. This is because the legislators and the KBA did not want to admit that they had forgotten this loophole in their regulations, so the manufacturers came to the conclusion that this loophole could be used and it was subsequently declared illegal.

13 So now we are in the middle of the transparency issue. For example, if it were a question of undignified working conditions, such as child labor, and we, not we, but some company, were to go there now because there is a requirement to be completely transparent about this and because there is great pressure in our society to do so.

14 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

15 It is also becoming increasingly important. In other words, the publication of CSR reports that address these issues. What are your thoughts?

16 **JRM:**

17 Yes yes yes. That's what I'm trying to get at. So there is this requirement in the civilized world that makes this more and more important. And there are people who read this report, but how do you put it into practice? How do you do that in practice? And does this report really mean transparency? Does it do that? Or is it a

declaration of innocence that has to be made because it is part of corporate responsibility to do so? Will this report be reviewed and read at some point? Or will it just give him the good feeling that it's true and we've done it? I'm very investigative at the moment. I would just like to discuss the question of the significance of these issues, which I am not questioning, in more depth and ask, is this done with the report? Is it really transparent, what is happening in the background, or is it just a safeguard? Similar to the KBA, which subsequently declares something illegal that was not illegal. Child labor is never nice, of course. But does the report really mean that this problem has been solved? Or does it just address it?

18 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

19 No, quite the opposite. In itself, and this is my opinion, it is almost a tool to influence the perceived transparency among stakeholders, but it does not make the company directly transparent... so the individual activities must actually be carried out.

20 **JRM:**

21 Yes, I was and have often been part of company statements.

22 In very many cases, it was more about finding the one that makes the company appear in the best light, without directly telling the untruth but also without directly telling the truth. For example, if you have a problem with a car, you want to tell the customer as bluntly as possible that it could catch fire while driving and that three people are already banned from it, right? Or if you have a problem like some companies did 20 years ago with millions of blocked ignition systems while driving, then for reasons of transparency it would be nice to tell the customer directly so that it doesn't happen while driving and so that they can still move the steering wheel while driving, which is important when cornering, so that you can still steer. Why don't they do that for 15 years? Until the cases run into the millions? Because they know that it will cost them billions to fix it. And because they shy away from doing so at a time when they are not yet prepared, even though they know they have this problem, preferring to blame it on the tolerance of customers who don't yet know what is happening to them and that they are morally able to do this for a few years without feeling ashamed. Think of the diesel scandal, there are engineers who built the VW Golf, and so they find that there are these new emissions regulations, and they are standardized under a test bench, under strictly controlled climatic conditions, driven by a computer. The cycle is only short so that several vehicles can be tested. The conditions are the same and written down so that all manufacturers test in the same way and the general public bench say the tests are crap because they don't correspond to the normal driving conditions of all the millions of vehicles on the road, but nevertheless they are the way they are. And here comes someone from Bosch and says that you are perhaps stupid, because at Volkswagen, only this test is prescribed. Only this test. And this test has very precise framework conditions and also has criteria that can be defined very precisely, because if you put the car on the chassis dynamometer, for example, it won't steer, it can't be steered otherwise it will drive off. And if our software recognizes that the vehicle is not being steered, then the exhaust systems switch off,

because on the road we switch them off, because during the test the car meets the requirements, and it is only in the law that the vehicle meets the requirements during the test - nobody is talking about the road. So we switch off the system on the road, which recognizes on the test bench that it has to work. That could save me 300 euros per vehicle, and with 10 million vehicles that's 3 billion. Have fun with that. So now it's a question of transparency, a question of morality. Is the test engineer now saying no, actually we're not building vehicles for the rollers, we're building them for the road, as the interpretations want, after everyone has understood that a lousy law has been written and what does that mean for internal and external transparency? And what do you want to explain in terms of transparency when you have such attitudes and make such decisions? Do you understand what I'm getting at?

23 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

24 Yes I do!

25 **JRM:**

26 So there are reports that you have to deliver in terms of transparency, and there are people in your company who more or less believe, because they are in communication, that the company will give you the right information. They have a duty to provide this transparency. The first question is whether they are being properly informed by their own company? Or do they let you do it, in terms of transparency? Maybe, but maybe not. In my communications career, I have experienced at least five cases where, when I asked the technicians directly, I was consistently lied to by my own people about what problem I had.

27 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

28 But, you assume that they should be provided with all the important information. So in a communications department in a perfect world, that's how it should be.

29 **JRM:**

30 No, that doesn't exist. There aren't that many people who, like me, have been in communications and 20 years in engineering. They are different people, with different tasks and different depths of experience.

31 If you're an engineer and, like me, you design the entire car, then you have to work with all the engineers who work on all parts of the car, from steering systems to exhaust systems and brakes. This depth of penetration is not always possible in communication. Not even in social responsibility. Because then there's someone who does the supply chain analysis, then there's someone who checks whether there have been experiments with animals or humans, or or or and the idea that everything is available transparently, even within the company, is already difficult because of the mass of information and the constantly changing information and the willingness of people to admit any mistakes at all... I'll give you an example.

32 There are people who say that outside diesel exhaust gases cause lung cancer, now you can investigate this empirically, i.e. carry out huge studies, but this is not one-to-one evidence. Or you could say we buy a few monkeys and put diesel fumes in

their cages and we don't put any in the other cages. It's a cruel approach because one monkey might have to die and the other doesn't, but because they are humanded, it's a one-to-one result as to whether people who would be exposed to the same thing might get lung cancer. So now company XY says, there's so much pressure right now that we have to test it first. They now commission one of our employees to buy monkeys, develop a test procedure and fumigate the monkeys with exhaust fumes to see whether the monkeys get lung cancer after 2, 3 or 6, 12 or 18 months. Do you want to tell anyone that?

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

34 No, probably not.

35 **JRM:**

36 Does it still sound logical? That you would do that because there is no other method to prove it 1 to 1, except with humans or living beings that are similar to humans. If anyone learns about it, or would learn about it, will someone take responsibility for it or say I didn't know? Even if they gave the order. So, transparency always depends on individuals and their inclination to want to be transparent at all and on their embedding in organizations that exert more or less pressure.

37 In the willingness to take responsibility for themselves or not.

38 From the willingness of organizations to exert pressure on their employees to achieve certain results, the definition of transparency has simply become too simple and bold in today's society because it has so many extensions that are missing. That doesn't mean that I don't think it's good to be transparent in a private relationship, I'm just much more aware of how much more complicated it is in complex systems and that transparency could be used to create supposed security and to delegate responsibility away from oneself so that someone else has it.

39 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

40 Okay, and in general, if I were to ask you now whether you think that transparency, the perception, so at the beginning you asked me what I think transparency can achieve, so to speak. Do you think that if transparency is used correctly, especially in communication, it can influence consumers' perception of a company's reputation?

41 **JRM:**

42 Yes, if it is true, it should be able to do that. But this immediately raises the question: what is truth anyway? Does truth even exist? Or is truth always relative and used for ends? Near Moscow, terrorists break into a hall and kill 130 people and an hour later the Russian president knows that they were sent from Ukraine. The Americans, on the other hand, explain that they know that the terrorists are from XY, from Afghanistan in province XY and that they have a roches on the Russians and that they have already written to them that this will happen. Now we go and ask 80% of Russians who have a state television, where only one truth is spread, and ask them and see that a day later it is already written on the bombs that this is for the attack in the rock hall that they are sending to Ukraine.

- 43 In other words, a completely different perception of transparency than that spread by the Americans, and one of which we do not know whether it is the whole truth. What is transparency now? Is there absolute transparency and absolute truth or is it also used to convey supposed truth?
- 44 Or to convey reassurance? In principle, however, I think it's good that such Saxons are being systematized and packaged in processes, although I have to say that when I look at some of the processes. Then I ask myself, if you work in a big company like me, you get about 300 emails a day. And 5 of these emails are some kind of sustainability process, rules on how to behave towards your employees, they are 100 pages long and the moment you look at them you have told your manager that you have read, understood and signed them.
- 45 Even though they don't have the time to read and understand it. And that doesn't mean that they have read and understood it. They only received it so that the compliance officer could say that he had sent it. It's all totally transparent. They know all this now and they will do all this now. Is that transparent? Yes, formally it is transparent.
- 46 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**
- 47 Yes, actually they just followed the guidelines.
- 48 **JRM:**
- 49 Exactly. And now we are at the next point. The world is becoming more and more about spreading guidelines and conforming things so that everyone thinks that all the guidelines have now been met. While people have no time to deal with all the guidelines and at the end of the day they realize that because they couldn't read all the guidelines and they didn't understand all the guidelines, they didn't follow the guidelines. But now because the document has been sent and signed, the whole world can now say, but I sent it, they knew quite transparently what they shouldn't do, but they did it anyway. So transparency, I'm sorry, is often also a means of distributing responsibility to others and diverting it away from oneself.
- 50 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**
- 51 Unfortunately, yes, you're probably right. It's not a simple construct, and you also have to look at it from different angles. If you don't mind, you can ask about digital corporate communication. So what importance do you currently attach to social networks in terms of transparency? You said to me that you worked in the communications department at the end of the 90s and that it has changed a lot in recent years, what do you think about this? Does the fact that people now communicate online about virtually everything contribute more to transparency?
- 52 **JRM:**
- 53 That's a really great question.
- 54 I'm really, well my employees call me meticulous, which means I like to know exactly what's going on as far as possible. And I also try to influence these things as precisely and meticulously as possible. This means that I have to deal extremely

intensively with topics and issues and engage with many different people and read a lot so that I can make reasonably sensible and sustainable decisions, which in turn will have an impact on the company's statements on sustainability, safety, emissions standards, you name it. My impression is not that all social media has helped to improve this situation of diversity of opinion. I'll be honest with you. When I read on TikTok, Facebook, on all kinds of social networks what is being spread, how people express themselves, with opinions on topics they obviously don't understand anything about and still insult, abuse and threaten. So I don't think it has helped society much. That's the first point. The second point is that, above all, I am convinced that diversity of opinion and the freedom to express opinions freely definitely help society. Absolutely. Of my 100 employees, whether it's the cleaning lady or an intern, I value the opinion of every single one of them, because if they are not completely stupid and have studied well and are otherwise intelligent, the sum of all opinions will be worth more than my own opinion. In this respect, social media are theoretically a very good thing, because they promote diversity of opinion, because they secure international opinions, unfortunately half of humanity seems so stupid that it kicks this goal into the trash can, with complete nonsense, with conspiracy theories and sheer nonsense. The best statement I've read recently is from a woman who, with the background that Mercedes is under pressure from any media, writes just one sentence and that is: "Since the 1997 test, I know what's going on with this company. Wow, that's a very profound sentence. 25 years ago, an accident happened, none of the people are still there, the car hasn't existed for a long time, but the woman has known what's going on in this company since this incident. The pretentiousness and the stupidity of such a statement, from someone who has no idea about anything at all but shouts his opinion to everyone, it's a very widespread phenomenon, on TikTok, on Twitter, on X, in everything you read. It's even, let's say if we look empirically, the biggest majority, people who can't write more than one accent but tell everyone they're idiots, can write with one sentence but then tell others they're complete idiots in that one sentence, always have been and always will be and especially people who can make up time and say they already knew it was a stupid decision but unfortunately didn't say it at the time. So that aside. When I look at our own communication channels now, at ever-shrinking budgets, and when I see what has happened in the media in recent decades, namely an ever-increasing consolidation of media outlets, down to very few opinion formers, fewer and fewer trained journalists, and more and more large and centralized houses that have a huge stable of media that is often not very transparent for the reader, where someone is at the top who is no longer interested in the news per se, but only in news formation. Do you think that anyone in the Bild newspaper and in the entire publishing house has the goal of informing people objectively?"

55 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

56 Definitely not with the Bild newspaper, no. Entertainment is more important there.

57 **JRM:**

58 No, not the entertainment. They're not that modest, they are manipulators. If the Bild newspaper decides to shoot down the Federal President, they will shoot him down. They've already done that once. They described him as a scandalous

president until he resigned from office. So it's not just entertainment, it's an attempt to exert political influence and form opinions rather than inform. In the competition of the media, the following happens: the fewer readers, the fewer clicks, the more they come under financial pressure and that leads to them having to lay off even more people, having to do even more with others, that leads to them wanting even more that people read their headlines, because they are paid for the click and that leads to the fact that people have to click without the headline having anything to do with the content that is then there. Take a look at Fokus Online, none of the headlines have anything to do with the text in the follow-up. They are all scandalized. Because they are supposed to generate clicks, and then when they read the text they ask themselves, what does the text have to do with the headline? Not really at all. Now we come to online communication and bloggers, while journalists might have a clue about transparency, not all of them do. Today, they often take advantage of their position, have obtained benefits, have tried to blackmail companies, I've seen it all. Today we are dealing with bloggers who are based in the United Arab Emirates, who travel around the world and, because they have 5 million followers, are invited to events by the industry and demand 100,000 EUR for each of their appearances. What will they say about the company? Journalistic content or will they say "Hey, pick me because the fans think I'm great and you can use me to communicate what a damn cool place you are and how else you can pay me and how else you can pay me". This is completely despised in journalism, but it works in social media. There are 100 of these people who have things sent to their homes by the truckload from the industry and then stand in front of the camera and say that this is a really great cream, they don't do any human trials, I've tried it 27 times now and my wrinkles have all gone away. Does anyone check this? Do we know if they get paid? We don't know, so social media again depends heavily on the people who do this, the people who have an intention with it, namely to reach 5 million followers, and whether they are transparent about it.

59 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

60 Or whether they let you buy their opinion.

61 **JRM:**

62 Yes, of course. There is also a great tendency to do this when I read bloggers like those in the United Arab Emirates, who are not subject to any control by anyone. Why shouldn't I buy them if I'm the boss? When the super car blogger presents my car with a smile? And knowing that she has 5 million followers, should I tell them that she gets all her flight costs paid for, etc.? She doesn't say anything substantive, but just how cool it is, and 5 million followers see that and that's part of digital communication. You can ask yourself whether it's worth it, there's someone who buys a G-Class and destroys it on camera. He has 3.5 million followers, now I'm in the limelight as a commander-in-chief; do I think it's good that someone drives my car into the wall and only does shit with it and endangers himself and others? But he has 3.5 million followers? What do I do with him now? Do I use it? Or do I say it's all nonsense, I don't do anything with it? Where does it end and where do I start?

63 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

64 Yes, you also have to look at the company values. Whether the range can be explained by that.

65 **JRM:**

66 But now it's getting complex. Now I, as the head of the comm, also have to understand reach. Understand why 3.5 million people are watching someone jumping down from somewhere and coming up stupid because they find it so funny. Do you understand what I mean? So I have to understand the mechanisms of digital media and why 3.5 million people watch something that makes no sense. It's difficult for me, but for other people it might be easy to explain - for younger people, for example.

67 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

68 But in fact, in our studies we have learned time and again that the number of followers is usually not so meaningful, for example if you had the choice between two influencers and one has 3.5 million followers and the other only 200k, that depending on whether it is an influencer who is really concerned with the topic, in our case, cars in his everyday life, and that is actually his main topic. He is probably the right choice instead of the one who simply has 3.5 million followers, because he is then perceived as more credible than the other one who has never shown any interest in cars.

69 **JRM:**

70 I think that's good. Of course you can deal with these topics scientifically, and you have to do that more and more often. You asked me whether I believe that digital media is an important aspect of communication and therefore also credibility. Of course they do. Because there are now 4.5 billion people who have Internet access. There is no other form of communication that reaches so far, into so many households with different income levels and across so many continents as digital communication. Anyone who says today that this is not important must be stupid. On the other hand, of course, it is also totally unacceptable, because of the 4.5 million people they can reach, they know that they have different cultures and ethics but don't know how they actually understand them. Hamas supporters celebrate big parties when 3,000 children and women are raped and slaughtered in the Gaza Strip. An event that is not received with equal enthusiasm on the other side. And you have to ask yourself how people can interpret one event in completely different ways. Is it cultural, is it religious? Is it hate? What is it due to? Yesterday there was a piece of news that turned out to be fake news, that reached millions of people and was a complete lie, but the whole Arab world wanted to believe it. Which led directly to protests, flags being burned, etc. Transparency.

71 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

72 Yes, you can really see how difficult it all is.

73 **JRM:**

74 Now I've done what I always do. I always confuse people.

75 **Lara Cardoso Nunes:**

76 No, on the contrary, they answered almost all my questions, which are in my guide, directly in this conversation. I looked at them from time to time and noticed that they answered one after the other. I just have one last question out of my own interest: how do you implement transparency in your own company, i.e. how does the car manufacturer ensure that communication is transparent? Is it about product information as well as the activities of the company itself or the strategy?

77 **JRM:**

78 Oh, I'll give you an example, but you're not allowed to use it: *(statements were deleted from this transcript)*

79 Such decisions on transparency, which can be communicated later, happen much earlier, in meetings where the communication people can't even be there because they don't have time or because they are busy with other things and may have to take on co-responsibility. Is that getting better and better? Good question, more and more transparency questions are being asked and it's getting more and more complicated. There are more and more regulations and more and more far-reaching regulations, which you then have to take responsibility for, even because they are no longer in your own country or in countries where you can even check whether you are doing what they say. And yet responsibility has to be taken. Who can do that? Who wants to do it? Who can judge that? Now I've completely probably confused you. But it was still a pleasure. I hope we get to meet in person one day. *(The rest of the conversation was deleted from this transcript)*

1	Expert interview ASA
2	8. April 2024, 10:01AM
3	44 Min. 41 Sec.
4	
5	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:03 Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic of digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry. This interview is going to be semi-structured, which means that I have about eight open questions, however additional questions are also possible if a more detailed answer is needed.
6	ASA 0:34 Okay.
7	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:35 And if possible I would appreciate it very much, that when answering my questions you would think about the german parent brand AUDI in general that you work for.
8	ASA 0:53 Okay.
9	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:54 Perfect, so I would start with a personal question. Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later?
10	ASA 1:04 Okay, I am 44 years old. My name is <i>(deleted from this transcript)</i> , I am the <i>(deleted from this transcript)</i> at AUDI in Portugal. So a German Brand. Would you like for me to talk also to about the function or what are the tasks that I usually perform?
11	Lara Cardoso Nunes 1:33 Yes that would be awesome thank you.
12	ASA 1:41 I am basically the responsible for defining the strategy and the communication according to the vision, mission and values of AUDI. I am also responsible for the
13	Positioning in the marketing. I have to organize campaigns, I have a team for that.

- 14 I have a team for product management, so we also manage pricing of the vehicles so this is basically it. Communicating brands, yeah, I sometimes call it that we are like the, the architectures of the brand since we are building it's own identity. One of the main things, and I've been working with automotive brands for 20 years now, and I can also state that I started out my career at Mercedes Benz, so also German brand.
- 15 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 2:36
Oh nice! Yeah.
- 16 **ASA** 2:44
I was there for 19 years.
- 17 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 2:47
Oh, that's a long time!
- 18 **ASA** 2:52
Yeah, it is quite a long time. So for 19 years I went along several functions. So I started out at content management in the public relations department and afterwards I started to do a product management. After that I went to public relations, working on the communication with together with journalists. So building all of the events, all of the car renewals, and I did that for 10 years roughly. Also did some other CRM projects. So I implemented a lead management system at Mercedes Benz. So several things within events, communication, marketing itself with CRM and recently just last year I took the new challenge to become Marketing & Communication Director here at Audi Portugal and that's what I've been doing since November. So it's pretty challenging once you get some know how to start implementing that on the strategy level because we are all doing strategy at a certain point, but what you really can't define all of the vision and the purpose that a brand has into its customer, it's really, really interesting and it it's something that really appealed to me. So that's why I took the challenge after 19 years to go from one premium brand to another premium brand. It was quite a challenge and I'm really happy with it.
- 19 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:38
Thank you so much for the introduction. Now, I would like to start with my questions right away if that's ok. The first one would be, how in your opinion, transparency implemented the best? I know that there's always many viewpoints on this and into like digital corporate communication strategies of automotive companies.

So you can like think about your work at Mercedes, but also right now at Audi, how do you think it's best implemented to be like a transparent automotive company?

20 **ASA** 5:08

OK, so in my 19 or 20 years right now in communication, I've seen several changes. One of it has been the introduction of the Internet and digital platforms, which has revolutionized a lot the way that companies are communicating nowadays.

21 It used to be pretty much one direction, so companies would communicate via tools, like either TV, radio or press or whenever they would like to communicate or convey certain images. They would use public relations and specially depressed to convey that message. Nowadays this has changed a lot and it changed into not being just One Direction communication, but two-way communication. One of the things that we've seen with the Internet is that people can access a lot of information these days.

Back in the 2000s, you could just buy a magazine to know which were the current trends and what were the auto brands doing. Nowadays, you have all of it in the Internet and it's like an encyclopedia you have from years back. You see a lot of the issues, you see a lot of the campaigns, you see a lot of the communications you see a lot of the problems as well.

So when you have this amount of information available to everybody, you really it's not that companies are hiding, but you can't hide anymore. Everything is out there, so you need to be more and more transparent towards your public. The way that you are communicating, you must be open. You have to have a talk with clients and this is one of the things that I've realized along the years that I've been here is the conversation that has started between the brands and the customers and most of the times it's not even that they're a customer, but we are already talking and we are getting the feedback as well. So this transparency chapter, it's really important in my point of view, because it just really opens up a whole new world for companies to develop, to show a lot of their purpose, a lot of the mission that they have. What are the key points that they want to communicate and also get some feedback out of out of what people really realize, mainly because of that.

22 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 8:00

Yes, feedback. Good point.

23 **ASA**8:07

Because now people have a voice with social networks and whenever I can give you an example, for example, back in 2008 or 2009. When everybody already had their accounts on Facebook and Instagram was starting to come up and Twitter was there.

I was in the marketing department, and I said OK, we should go into social media and at the time everybody was like, but that's really dangerous because then we're really out there and they can criticize us and they can really point out and you can get the haters just going at you. And I was saying, yeah but I really see that the world is going to into this this direction, so we should really be like the first ones and at Mercedes Benz that at the time we were the first ones, I believe even in Portugal, to go into social media, we went in with Twitter, with YouTube and with Facebook. I believe Instagram was not there at the time, but we started to communicate this way and it was another way, not only doing normal advertising in which we are conveying the message that we want, but we were showing our product. We were showing up innovation, technology, some topics that we usually didn't do and of course that's most of the time we were well perceived, but we started to see as well that whenever there was already a problem, and this is something that no company can say that they are completely at ease with. Everybody will have some sort of problem with a customer at some point because they're either unhappy with the service or they didn't like this or that and they go in and they really start to push against you in front of everybody and they see that as an opportunity to get people even more people, even more stressed. So that they can so that they can push their desire into what they really want to achieve from that. So we had some learnings at the time as well with that.

24 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 10:36

So learning by doing as well in the beginning.

25 **ASA** 10:37

Yeah, learning by doing it is one of those things that once you go in, you don't know the complete package that you will get, but you need to go in and Start learning and that's one of the things that's I believe brands are doing and have done since then is going in being the most transparent that they can be. So that people can really relate and it's one of the things that I do understand that transparency, it's most of the times what makes you stand out from others, makes you be original at a certain point as well. But you need to be really agile and flexible because it is a world which is in constant move and you really need to adapt fast as well.

26 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 11:40

So how would you think that a transparency level or high transparency level of the digital corporate communication influences the perception of the reputation among consumers for example do you think it is always positive or do you also see some negative aspects?

27 **ASA** 12:01

No, I would like to see it as positive.

Everything that we do, we are not doing in order to jeopardize the company reputation, everything that we do is trying to get the most out of a clear, transparent and original image. But like I said, it is always a risk.

You can get really how can I say not burned, but the image can be sometimes, if not well managed, it can get into jeopardy. And there are certain cases with certain brands, where their social media strategy, was completely off and they really went off and afterwards they even had to come and say sorry we didn't do this the right way, but it it's like the learning thing and I think communication has really evolved. It's given a voice to a whole part of the world which did not have a voice, which was customers. Your only voice that you had was like word of mouth.

That's you could say, oh I really like this product to a friend or to a colleague, It's really good. So that was consumer's voice. Nowadays, consumers voice it's completely out there on social media and anybody can be an influencer. Everybody can have an opinion and for anybody can contribute according to the experience that they're having with the company. So, the more transparent the company is to individuals, the more benefits it can get in the long run. It is quite challenging right now how to stand out because a lot of people, a lot of companies are doing a lot of ideas, being really creative and this is something that it is sometimes stressful for budgets and everything, to keep up with all of the trends.

So it's one of the challenges that companies also have.

28 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:21

Yes. What kind of trends do you see for the future of the corporate communication or like especially digitally?

29 **ASA** 14:35

What kind of trends I see?

30 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:42

Yes, exactly.

31 **ASA** 14:48

Let me think about it. Well, you really need to be original in order to stand out from the others. What are the trends? Well, currently you see AI as the big trend. I see it as a huge benefits for most or a lot of the functions that we currently have.

32 So it's like when the calculator came up, it was really easy because people were not doing their math on their head or with a pencil in on the paper, they were doing it

with the calculator. So, the next step is artificial intelligence for the future, you will be able to use it in benefit of the companies, which is good. Of course, there are also some challenges that for me, without official artificial intelligence and with the whole digitalization of the world, you're losing one part which for me as a marketer, it's very important, which is face to face experiences.

So once you go into the digital world, you have a lot of things that you didn't have until then. You can do a lot of creativity. You can do a lot of interaction with customers on a very creative world. But you lose this proximity.

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:28

Yes, for sure.

34 **ASA** 16:29

So the physical contact, I am a big supporter for events. For example, since we are talking about the automotive industry, which is a huge industry, you can get a lot of great ideas for the websites, for experiences, for virtual tours, you can go into a car, you can even drive a car. But it's not the same thing as really being inside the car and the experience, the touching the wheel, seeing the materials, the dynamic of a car, you still can't give this because it's a physical experience.

You need to experience it, the car. So I think artificial intelligence will bring in its one of the challenges that I see for the future. It will bring a lot of good things, but it can also it can also make us individuals, more lonely and without social contacts. And this is one of the things that we need to really balance.

35 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:41

And be careful.

36 **ASA** 17:43

Yeah, so there's not a disconnection from people with the company and with the products, because you really need to feel the emotion for the product.

That's and that's one of the things that we are always working here at Audi is we want to convey the emotion. Driving a car isn't just going from A to B.

It is the whole emotion of being with your family, going off on the weekend, this whole experience is something which is great and that we also want to start on the digital world but bring it to a physical world afterwards.

37 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 18:10

It's an whole experience.

38 **ASA** 18:23

So I do believe that both worlds can really work with the with each other so that there's not this sense of disconnection between companies and people.

39 A challenge that I also see and I was just thinking about it because of artificial intelligence, and it's something that's here at the company, it's also a point that is very well taken care of is the digital security for data protection. More and more we are putting our data out there on the Internet. There are a lot of companies which sometimes are under attack and you need to always invest in web security because I do believe that the future is digital but you really need to be careful with everything in there, because otherwise your whole life could be just scattered if they get some of the data out of you, your data, your bank accounts, everything needs to be, pretty much sealed and looked after. So Social Security is one of the things that's here at Volkswagen and Audi are pretty important because Cyber security, it is crucial and for the future from what we see, the cars will be not built like the previous 100 years in which we were just thinking about, OK, we want performance, we want a very good design. We are not thinking about fuel efficiency or something like that, no, for the future we are thinking a lot on that, especially being transparent to people of what is the fuel economy of a car. What is the CO2 which is our strategy to fight that and to make better and better cars. And we are developing cars in a new way for the future. What we see is it's not developing a design and then trying to convey we are building more and more a software and then we build the car on that.

40 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 20:59

About this. There's a lot of information and like in the background that goes on when building those cars, in your opinion, to what extent does this information about like product information about how the car was produced, what materials are used, what softwares you use, how do you think that that can contribute to the perception of transparency? Are you the opinion that the consumers should have all the information, or do you feel like maybe some information should be left out since it could confuse them? What's your thought on that?

41 **ASA** 21:47

Yeah. So, as we are building software for the future and then a car. We are giving more and more utilities to the customer. Of course, this also has to do with the European and the world regulations in which we do know that we need to help people have a better car with better software, a lot of the cars right now they are being used with support systems in order for people to always be advised, in the past you would have like the rear view mirrors that you could see other cars, now

you have a whole range of sensors that can tell you there's a car coming. That there is traffic ahead, to please slow down in the 50s zone and you're going 70, so a lot of these systems are now benefiting the customer and especially benefiting safety either for the passengers and also for the commuters.

For example, we are just now going to launch a car in which the rear signs, so the stop signs that usually just see red. Now it's going to convey messages.

So for example, if the car ahead sees danger and it stops, it's giving a message to the other drivers with a triangle on there saying be careful, because I'm stopping because there's a problem ahead. So all of this is very, very interesting and companies are being completely honest on the way that they want to go for mobility with safety. We would like to go into a point in which there's almost zero accidents. Nobody wants a person to have an accident with a car. Although the cars are complete with a lot of systems like air bags, the braking systems are better and better, the formation areas within the car which protects the passengers are really good. Nobody wants to go through that experience and we are providing more and more software in order to help the customer being aware of all of the signals around and also providing connectivity brings you to a whole new chapter, which today you can even if you don't have your own key with you, you can say to a friend of yours or to your husband or to your children. You can take the car. I'm going to give you a password via the car app, and you can go in and drive the car. So and you have a lot of other features that today you can do with an app, like see where the car is parked, open the windows, close the windows, open the car, close the car, whatever you are in the world and a lot of these things are also user benefits. But at a certain point, you also need to be careful, because this is data. This is connectivity that you're bringing into the car and you cannot have anybody else breaking in and hacking to your car because the cars are completely connected in the past you could see that people could break into a car and try to steal it, but the more you have a car as a software like a computer, a person could get into the car and that's why we are always trying to build a lot of cyber security around the software of the cars, which is a huge investment. And we also tried to convey that to our customers, showing that well, you can do a lot of these features even for the future. One of the things that's we are probably going to have is right now, what you do is you configure a car and you can say I want this, this and this equipment into the car and the car is built like that. According to the the equipment's that you said, but for the future and this is a holistic view, you can just say, OK, I want this car in this color and this equipment line and that's it. And then the car comes fully with extras. And you just say, OK, now I want to activate for a whole month the navigation and you pay for that instead of building your car and saying ohh, I already want the full amount of

this development for the future with software you can just say ohh I am willing to have navigation or I am willing to have the seat heating for the whole winter and I will pay it for three months and you just unblock that with the with an app. So, the future is completely digital and I think all of the brands are trying to do exactly that. So, giving more and more services to the customer but as well trying to show how important is the whole security area because it could be like a completely open book that a person could hack in and access your car.

42 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 27:48

And do you feel like giving the customers all this information like why you're doing it, could help like and that the company...because what I also hear a lot is like walk to talk do not just say what you're going to do, like it is better to implement it into the car. And of course you should also like communicate it right, so how do you feel about how much should be communicated about the product to the customer?

43 **ASA** 27:56

Yeah, well, one of the things that all the brands, I'm not just talking about the Audi, a lot of the brands want to have their salesman and their product people to know all of the features so that they can do a proper explanation to customers. Of course, we're not going to tell a customer. Ohh you have to really be careful with your passwords and everything because otherwise the person can access your card. No, I think that's common knowledge. It's like your email or your bank account. Everybody knows these days, once you are connected and if you don't have a strong password, if you're neglecting some security measures, you might be at risk and this also goes for the car one. One of the things that we always try to explain is we're moving forwards, and one of the claims of Audi is to be on the outbreak of technology showing that and we do have a lot of technology on the car. We have a lot of connectivity on the car, but of course we also secured to the customer that we are always looking into security for that car. But this also needs to come from the customers know-how and if we need, if his phone gets hacked or something. Of course, everything is at jeopardy, but that that's all. That's his bank account. Everything should be at jeopardy. So, what we can convey is we have very specific security measures for the car in terms of connectivity, we can ensure that. But I think the customer already knows like he knows for other points. I don't know if you I answered you properly to what you needed.

44 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 30:35

Yes, you are answering everything really, really good. Thank you so much. And it's just like to be in that transparency way I'm.

Can I like say that the conclusion would be that you're the opinion of giving a lot of information, like about how everything works right?

45 **ASA** 30:59

How everything works but not the whole construction of everything?

46 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 31:04

Yes.

47 **ASA** 31:05

Because that's giving like the information that a hacker would need to try to go around the system, of course.

48 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 31:12

Yes. And all the information the consumer needs to have the best, best experience with the car, OK.

49 **ASA** 31:18

Yeah, completely, completely everything behind. It's, I think all the companies have their own secrets.

50 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 31:26

Yes.

51 **ASA** 31:27

And it needs to be like that otherwise it would be a complete mess because we do know and we've seen with a lot of companies, how the hacking can affect and even there since we're talking about transparency, once this happens, it's important that a company immediately warns its customers of what has happened. And this is something which also needs to be addressed that people know.

52 OK, I have my data here so and they can assure me that it is safe, but nobody in this world is a completely safe of a hacking. And if it happens, it needs to be quickly understood to which extend it went and of course go out to public, inform customers and say this happened and we could secure.

53 We are just at risk at this and this so that people are not at a certain point, not relying on that the company is being completely honest with them, because this is the whole trust issue that customers and companies are nowadays building more and more.

54 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 32:54

Yeah. That is a good point.

And so I have one more question that goes into the topic of corporate social responsibility and it would be how like in your opinion, how does publication of corporate social responsibility reports contribute to the perceived transparency of a company in the automotive industry? And does your company do it?

55 **ASA** 33:20

Yeah, of course. So in terms of reputation, at least today the main top companies in the world, they want to communicate transparently.

They do it in order to have a good reputation and so that people can really relate with these with these kind of companies. And there you really need to convey what is your work ethic, what are your core values, what is very important, what is your purpose as a company? What are you striving at? Do you want to savor the world, do you want to convey mobility and what is your purpose as a company so that people can really understand and relate? And for Audi, if I can also talk about it, one of the things is innovation. It has been in the forefront of the company innovation in technology. So also going out for that and explaining so that people can really relate once they think about a company in the automotive business, they can say Audi, it stands for this and this, they can immediately say. Very important the financial performance if it's healthy company it gives out a good reputation for the brand and for the products and the vision that they have.

So the Social reports and the sustainability reports that we are putting out and Audi does it, it's showing what is our path currently the path that company has done as the main is electrification.

56 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 35:01

Yes.

57 **ASA** 35:15

So the company has said and has stated we are going to leave combustion engines. We are aware that the previous 100 years in terms of technology, it was not possible to just leave it. We had not the technology there, but nowadays with the technology there and with a lot of new companies coming up and showing that it is possible, there are more and more for the coming years, there will be more and more innovations in terms of the concept of the electric car and the batteries.

So we are going fully electric. It's one of the statements that the company has had that by 2030 it wants to be completely electric and that's our purpose, to do the electrification of the vehicle because companies are more and more concerned with the Environmental Protection. So we are completely aware that there are climate

changes happening all over the world. It's not just saying, this is always something very important. It's not just saying that it is the car industry, which is doing all of this, of course not. It is part of the problem, of course, but we also have numerous factories. Other ways of transport which are also affecting the climate all around the world. But the request was done worldwide to the car companies to reflect and to start doing something different. And that's what we are doing at Audi. We are going into a sustainable mode. We are thinking more and more to do climate protection.

More and more, we are looking into ways not only electrification but also other kinds of fuels which are less polluted on this way because it's not like for the previous 100 years we did it like this. So we can switch on one or two years. It's just not possible.

You really need to have some years and in Europe we have until 2035 to start changing, so we want to do it faster. That's why we went for the end of this decade to go completely electric, because we are aware that this is the transition that the industry needs to do. It is not sustainable to continue like this and a part of that we are doing a lot of transformations also inside the company that we communicate in terms of for example how we get the energy to produce the cars that it's not coming also out of fossil fuels but from wind energy from solar energy at the factories. So that at a certain point we can say that we are an industry which is completely carbon neutral and this is a message that we want to convey to all of the customers in, in our reports. What are we doing and how much are we investing in producing batteries in developing new cars? Exiting thing to green energy not going to expensive materials, like leather and everything, but being more sustainable with that looking into new ways of producing fabrics, reusing a lot of the plastics. And this is something that it is already done within the company and more and more it will be done for the future and all of these messages we are completely transparent and not just saying, oh, we are going green, but we're not showing what we are doing and this is what we do with these reports. We try to show what is the path. How are we doing? How are we adapting? It will take years, of course, but it is a way...

58 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 39:22
You're working on it.

59 **ASA** 39:35y

60 Yeah, we are working on it and we want to achieve the goal to be carbon neutral by the end of this decade. And this is the whole thing that we are doing for social responsibility. All of the projects.

61 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 39:41

And do you think that so you already said some positive effects of like being transparent like digitally and also like with explaining how you're like doing all this corporate social responsibility work within the car, but also in your communities and to the world and you already, like you said like reputation can be positively influenced and you also mentioned trust. Can you think about more positive effects of transparent digital communication in the automotive industry?

62 **ASA** 40:33

I think if we are creative and an inspiring brand, we can bring a lot of trust regarding the work we are doing. Especially in times like these, which are times of a bit of uncertainty, we have the climate change, we just went out of a pandemic which changed a lot of the habits that everybody had. We had the crisis for a lot of materials. We are currently with two wars which are affecting the markets. So in all of this, we live in kind of a fluke environment. So it's very volatile. You really need to adapt all the time.

63 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 41:15

Yes.

64 **ASA** 41:16

So that's you. You are constantly being agile and flexible in order for people to keep having trust in in what you're doing.

65 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 41:27

So you would say like the biggest effect would be then trust in the company while being transparent and that's almost like a main goal to ensure that your customers trust you?

66 **ASA** 41:36

Yes. Yes, yes, completely.

I think trust is one of the key factors and for reputation and for people to rely and to at least the see themselves as that brand.

67 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 41:47

Yes.

- 68 **ASA** 41:57
But once you convey all of those messages, people can really relate with it.
- 69 So trust it, it's a key factor.
- 70 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 42:05
OK. Thank you so much. And I just have like one more final question because our time is up almost, but I'm, but I'm really interested in and that's something I have asked all my interview like in my interviews. And I know it's not easy. It's like a challenge. So how would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication in just like one or two sentences.
- 71 **ASA** 42:34
How would I define the digital transparency?
OK. Let me see... So in a sentence let me just think about it. So in Audi, we would like we want to lead and to inspire people to make us a better brand because by saying this I'm saying that we are empowering people to also give us feedback so we can be a better brand.
- 72 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 44:11
Okay, yes, that's perfect.
Like empowering and feedback, those are keywords that I can use. Because at the end my goal will be to have like a definition and kind of everybody tells me keywords and I will use those keywords to build an own definition.
- 73 **ASA** 44:19
OK for sure.
- 74 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 44:34
I will just stop the recording.

- 1 **Expert interview ASA**
- 2 8. April 2024, 10:01AM
- 3 44 Min. 41 Sec.
- 4
- 5 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 0:03
Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic of

digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry. This interview is going to be semi-structured, which means that I have about eight open questions, however additional questions are also possible if a more detailed answer is needed.

6 **ASA** 0:34

Okay.

7 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 0:35

And if possible I would appreciate it very much, that when answering my questions you would think about the German parent brand Audi in general that you work for.

8 **ASA** 0:53

Okay.

9 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 0:54

Perfect, so I would start with a personal question. Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later?

10 **ASA** 1:04

Okay, I am 44 years old. My name is XXX, I am the Marketing & Communications Director at AUDI in Portugal. So a German Brand. Would you like for me to talk also to about the function or what are the tasks that I usually perform?

11 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 1:33

Yes that would be awesome thank you.

12 **ASA** 1:41

I am basically the responsible for defining the strategy and the communication according to the vision, mission and values of Audi. I am also responsible for the

13 Positioning in the marketing. I have to organize campaigns, I have a team for that.

14 I have a team for product management, so we also manage pricing of the vehicles so this is basically it. Communicating brands, yeah, I sometimes call it that we are like the, the architectures of the brand since we are building its own identity. One of the main things, and I've been working with automotive brands for 20 years now, and I can also state that I started out my career at Mercedes Benz, so also German brand.

15 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 2:36

Oh nice! Yeah.

16 **ASA** 2:44

I was there for 19 years.

17 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 2:47

Oh, that's a long time!

18 **ASA** 2:52

Yeah, it is quite a long time. So for 19 years I went along several functions. So I started out at content management in the public relations department and afterwards I started to do a product management. After that I went to public relations, working on the communication with together with journalists. So building all of the events, all of the car renewals, and I did that for 10 years roughly. Also did some other CRM projects. So I implemented a lead management system at Mercedes Benz. So several things within events, communication, marketing itself with CRM and recently just last year I took the new challenge to become Marketing & Communication Director here at Audi Portugal and that's what I've been doing since November. So it's pretty challenging once you get some know how to start implementing that on the strategy level because we are all doing strategy at a certain point, but what you really can't define all of the vision and the purpose that a brand has into its customer, it's really, really interesting and it it's something that really appealed to me. So that's why I took the challenge after 19 years to go from one premium brand to another premium brand. It was quite a challenge and I'm really happy with it.

19 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:38

Thank you so much for the introduction. Now, I would like to start with my questions right away if that's ok. The first one would be, how in your opinion, transparency implemented the best? I know that there's always many viewpoints on this and into like digital corporate communication strategies of automotive companies.

So you can like think about your work at Mercedes, but also right now at Audi, how do you think it's best implemented to be like a transparent automotive company?

20 **ASA** 5:08

OK, so in my 19 or 20 years right now in communication, I've seen several changes. One of it has been the introduction of the Internet and digital platforms, which has revolutionized a lot the way that companies are communicating nowadays.

21 It used to be pretty much one direction, so companies would communicate via tools, like either TV, radio or press or whenever they would like to communicate or convey certain images. They would use public relations and specially depressed to convey that message. Nowadays this has changed a lot and it changed into not being just One Direction communication, but two-way communication. One of the things

that we've seen with the Internet is that people can access a lot of information these days.

Back in the 2000s, you could just buy a magazine to know which were the current trends and what were the auto brands doing. Nowadays, you have all of it in the Internet and it's like an encyclopedia you have from years back. You see a lot of the issues, you see a lot of the campaigns, you see a lot of the communications you see a lot of the problems as well.

So when you have this amount of information available to everybody, you really it's not that companies are hiding, but you can't hide anymore. Everything is out there, so you need to be more and more transparent towards your public. The way that you are communicating, you must be open. You have to have a talk with clients and this is one of the things that I've realized along the years that I've been here is the conversation that has started between the brands and the customers and most of the times it's not even that they're a customer, but we are already talking and we are getting the feedback as well. So this transparency chapter, it's really important in my point of view, because it just really opens up a whole new world for companies to develop, to show a lot of their purpose, a lot of the mission that they have. What are the key points that they want to communicate and also get some feedback out of out of what people really realize, mainly because of that.

22 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 8:00

Yes, feedback. Good point.

23 **ASA**8:07

Because now people have a voice with social networks and whenever I can give you an example, for example, back in 2008 or 2009. When everybody already had their accounts on Facebook and Instagram was starting to come up and Twitter was there. I was in the marketing department, and I said OK, we should go into social media and at the time everybody was like, but that's really dangerous because then we're really out there and they can criticize us and they can really point out and you can get the haters just going at you. And I was saying, yeah but I really see that the world is going to into this this direction, so we should really be like the first ones and at Mercedes Benz that at the time we were the first ones, I believe even in Portugal, to go into social media, we went in with Twitter, with YouTube and with Facebook. I believe Instagram was not there at the time, but we started to communicate this way and it was another way, not only doing normal advertising in which we are conveying the message that we want, but we were showing our product. We were showing up innovation, technology, some topics that we usually didn't do and of course that's most of the time we were well perceived, but we

started to see as well that whenever there was already a problem, and this is something that no company can say that they are completely at ease with.

Everybody will have some sort of problem with a customer at some point because they're either unhappy with the service or they didn't like this or that and they go in and they really start to push against you in front of everybody and they see that as an opportunity to get people even more people, even more stressed. So that they can so that they can push their desire into what they really want to achieve from that. So we had some learnings at the time as well with that.

24 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 10:36

So learning by doing as well in the beginning.

25 **ASA** 10:37

Yeah, learning by doing it is one of those things that once you go in, you don't know the complete package that you will get, but you need to go in and Start learning and that's one of the things that's I believe brands are doing and have done since then is going in being the most transparent that they can be. So that people can really relate and it's one of the things that I do understand that transparency, it's most of the times what makes you stand out from others, makes you be original at a certain point as well. But you need to be really agile and flexible because it is a world which is in constant move and you really need to adapt fast as well.

26 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 11:40

So how would you think that a transparency level or high transparency level of the digital corporate communication influences the perception of the reputation among consumers for example do you think it is always positive or do you also see some negative aspects?

27 **ASA** 12:01

No, I would like to see it as positive.

Everything that we do, we are not doing in order to jeopardize the company reputation, everything that we do is trying to get the most out of a clear, transparent and original image. But like I said, it is always a risk.

You can get really how can I say not burned, but the image can be sometimes, if not well managed, it can get into jeopardy. And there are certain cases with certain brands, where their social media strategy, was completely off and they really went off and afterwards they even had to come and say sorry we didn't do this the right way, but it it's like the learning thing and I think communication has really evolved. It's given a voice to a whole part of the world which did not have a voice, which was customers. Your only voice that you had was like word of mouth.

That's you could say, oh I really like this product to a friend or to a colleague, It's really good. So that was consumer's voice. Nowadays, consumers voice it's completely out there on social media and anybody can be an influencer. Everybody can have an opinion and for anybody can contribute according to the experience that they're having with the company. So, the more transparent the company is to individuals, the more benefits it can get in the long run. It is quite challenging right now how to stand out because a lot of people, a lot of companies are doing a lot of ideas, being really creative and this is something that it is sometimes stressful for budgets and everything, to keep up with all of the trends. So it's one of the challenges that companies also have.

28 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:21

Yes. What kind of trends do you see for the future of the corporate communication or like especially digitally?

29 **ASA** 14:35

What kind of trends I see?

30 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:42

Yes, exactly.

31 **ASA** 14:48

Let me think about it. Well, you really need to be original in order to stand out from the others. What are the trends? Well, currently you see AI as the big trend. I see it as a huge benefits for most or a lot of the functions that we currently have.

32 So it's like when the calculator came up, it was really easy because people were not doing their math on their head or with a pencil in on the paper, they were doing it with the calculator. So, the next step is artificial intelligence for the future, you will be able to use it in benefit of the companies, which is good. Of course, there are also some challenges that for me, without official artificial intelligence and with the whole digitalization of the world, you're losing one part which for me as a marketer, it's very important, which is face to face experiences. So once you go into the digital world, you have a lot of things that you didn't have until then. You can do a lot of creativity. You can do a lot of interaction with customers on a very creative world. But you lose this proximity.

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:28

Yes, for sure.

34 **ASA** 16:29

So the physical contact, I am a big supporter for events. For example, since we are

talking about the automotive industry, which is a huge industry, you can get a lot of great ideas for the websites, for experiences, for virtual tours, you can go into a car, you can even drive a car. But it's not the same thing as really being inside the car and the experience, the touching the wheel, seeing the materials, the dynamic of a car, you still can't give this because it's a physical experience.

You need to experience it, the car. So I think artificial intelligence will bring in its one of the challenges that I see for the future. It will bring a lot of good things, but it can also it can also make us individuals, more lonely and without social contacts. And this is one of the things that we need to really balance.

35 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:41

And be careful.

36 **ASA** 17:43

Yeah, so there's not a disconnection from people with the company and with the products, because you really need to feel the emotion for the product.

That's and that's one of the things that we are always working here at Audi is we want to convey the emotion. Driving a car isn't just going from A to B.

It is the whole emotion of being with your family, going off on the weekend, this whole experience is something which is great and that we also want to start on the digital world but bring it to a physical world afterwards.

37 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 18:10

It's an whole experience.

38 **ASA** 18:23

So I do believe that both worlds can really work with the with each other so that there's not this sense of disconnection between companies and people.

39 A challenge that I also see and I was just thinking about it because of artificial intelligence, and it's something that's here at the company, it's also a point that is very well taken care of is the digital security for data protection. More and more we are putting our data out there on the Internet. There are a lot of companies which sometimes are under attack and you need to always invest in web security because I do believe that the future is digital but you really need to be careful with everything in there, because otherwise your whole life could be just scattered if they get some of the data out of you, your data, your bank accounts, everything needs to be, pretty much sealed and looked after. So Social Security is one of the things that's here at Volkswagen and Audi are pretty important because Cyber security, it is crucial and for the future from what we see, the cars will be not built like the previous 100 years

in which we were just thinking about, OK, we want performance, we want a very good design. We are not thinking about fuel efficiency or something like that, no, for the future we are thinking a lot on that, especially being transparent to people of what is the fuel economy of a car. What is the CO2 which is our strategy to fight that and to make better and better cars. And we are developing cars in a new way for the future. What we see is it's not developing a design and then trying to convey we are building more and more a software and then we build the car on that.

40 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 20:59

About this. There's a lot of information and like in the background that goes on when building those cars, in your opinion, to what extent does this information about like product information about how the car was produced, what materials are used, what softwares you use, how do you think that that can contribute to the perception of transparency? Are you the opinion that the consumers should have all the information, or do you feel like maybe some information should be left out since it could confuse them? What's your thought on that?

41 **ASA** 21:47

Yeah. So, as we are building software for the future and then a car. We are giving more and more utilities to the customer. Of course, this also has to do with the European and the world regulations in which we do know that we need to help people have a better car with better software, a lot of the cars right now they are being used with support systems in order for people to always be advised, in the past you would have like the rear view mirrors that you could see other cars, now you have a whole range of sensors that can tell you there's a car coming. That there is traffic ahead, to please slow down in the 50s zone and you're going 70, so a lot of these systems are now benefiting the customer and especially benefiting safety either for the passengers and also for the commuters.

For example, we are just now going to launch a car in which the rear signs, so the stop signs that usually just see red. Now it's going to convey messages.

So for example, if the car ahead sees danger and it stops, it's giving a message to the other drivers with a triangle on there saying be careful, because I'm stopping because there's a problem ahead. So all of this is very, very interesting and companies are being completely honest on the way that they want to go for mobility with safety. We would like to go into a point in which there's almost zero accidents. Nobody wants a person to have an accident with a car. Although the cars are complete with a lot of systems like air bags, the braking systems are better and better, the formation areas within the car which protects the passengers are really good. Nobody wants to go through that experience and we are providing more and

more software in order to help the customer being aware of all of the signals around and also providing connectivity brings you to a whole new chapter, which today you can even if you don't have your own key with you, you can say to a friend of yours or to your husband or to your children. You can take the car. I'm going to give you a password via the car app, and you can go in and drive the car. So and you have a lot of other features that today you can do with an app, like see where the car is parked, open the windows, close the windows, open the car, close the car, whatever you are in the world and a lot of these things are also user benefits. But at a certain point, you also need to be careful, because this is data. This is connectivity that you're bringing into the car and you cannot have anybody else breaking in and hacking to your car because the cars are completely connected in the past you could see that people could break into a car and try to steal it, but the more you have a car as a software like a computer, a person could get into the car and that's why we are always trying to build a lot of cyber security around the software of the cars, which is a huge investment. And we also tried to convey that to our customers, showing that well, you can do a lot of these features even for the future. One of the things that's we are probably going to have is right now, what you do is you configure a car and you can say I want this, this and this equipment into the car and the car is built like that. According to the the equipment's that you said, but for the future and this is a holistic view, you can just say, OK, I want this car in this color and this equipment line and that's it. And then the car comes fully with extras. And you just say, OK, now I want to activate for a whole month the navigation and you pay for that instead of building your car and saying ohh, I already want the full amount of this development for the future with software you can just say ohh I am willing to have navigation or I am willing to have the seat heating for the whole winter and I will pay it for three months and you just unblock that with the with an app. So, the future is completely digital and I think all of the brands are trying to do exactly that. So, giving more and more services to the customer but as well trying to show how important is the whole security area because it could be like a completely open book that a person could hack in and access your car.

42 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 27:48

And do you feel like giving the customers all this information like why you're doing it, could help like and that the company...because what I also hear a lot is like walk to talk do not just say what you're going to do, like it is better to implement it into the car. And of course you should also like communicate it right, so how do you feel about how much should be communicated about the product to the customer?

43 **ASA** 27:56

Yeah, well, one of the things that all the brands, I'm not just talking about the Audi, a lot of the brands want to have their salesman and their product people to know all of the features so that they can do a proper explanation to customers.

Of course, we're not going to tell a customer. Ohh you have to really be careful with your passwords and everything because otherwise the person can access your card.

No, I think that's common knowledge. It's like your email or your bank account.

Everybody knows these days, once you are connected and if you don't have a strong password, if you're neglecting some security measures, you might be at risk and this also goes for the car one. One of the things that we always try to explain is we're moving forwards, and one of the claims of Audi is to be on the outbreak of technology showing that and we do have a lot of technology on the car. We have a lot of connectivity on the car, but of course we also secured to the customer that we are always looking into security for that car. But this also needs to come from the customers know-how and if we need, if his phone gets hacked or something.

Of course, everything is at jeopardy, but that that's all. That's his bank account.

Everything should be at jeopardy. So, what we can convey is we have very specific security measures for the car in terms of connectivity, we can ensure that. But I think the customer already knows like he knows for other points. I don't know if you I answered you properly to what you needed.

44 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 30:35

Yes, you are answering everything really, really good. Thank you so much.

And it's just like to be in that transparency way I'm.

Can I like say that the conclusion would be that you're the opinion of giving a lot of information, like about how everything works right?

45 **ASA** 30:59

How everything works but not the whole construction of everything?

46 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 31:04

Yes.

47 **ASA** 31:05

Because that's giving like the information that a hacker would need to try to go around the system, of course.

48 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 31:12

Yes. And all the information the consumer needs to have the best, best experience with the car, OK.

- 49 **ASA** 31:18
Yeah, completely, completely everything behind. It's, I think all the companies have their own secrets.
- 50 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 31:26
Yes.
- 51 **ASA** 31:27
And it needs to be like that otherwise it would be a complete mess because we do know and we've seen with a lot of companies, how the hacking can affect and even there since we're talking about transparency, once this happens, it's important that a company immediately warns its customers of what has happened. And this is something which also needs to be addressed that people know.
- 52 OK, I have my data here so and they can assure me that it is safe, but nobody in this world is a completely safe of a hacking. And if it happens, it needs to be quickly understood to which extend it went and of course go out to public, inform customers and say this happened and we could secure.
- 53 We are just at risk at this and this so that people are not at a certain point, not relying on that the company is being completely honest with them, because this is the whole trust issue that customers and companies are nowadays building more and more.
- 54 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 32:54
Yeah. That is a good point.
And so I have one more question that goes into the topic of corporate social responsibility and it would be how like in your opinion, how does publication of corporate social responsibility reports contribute to the perceived transparency of a company in the automotive industry? And does your company do it?
- 55 **ASA** 33:20
Yeah, of course. So in terms of reputation, at least today the main top companies in in the world, they want to communicate transparently.
They do it in order to have a good reputation and so that people can really relate with these with these kind of companies. And there you really need to convey what is your work ethic, what are your core values, what is very important, what is your purpose as a company? What are you striving at? Do you want to savor the world, do you want to convey mobility and what is your purpose as a company so that people can really understand and relate? And for Audi, if I can also talk about it, one of the things is innovation. It has been in the forefront of the company

innovation in technology. So also going out for that and explaining so that people can really relate once they think about a company in the automotive business, they can say Audi, it stands for this and this, they can immediately say. Very important the financial performance if it's healthy company it gives out a good reputation for the brand and for the products and the vision that they have.

So the Social reports and the sustainability reports that we are putting out and Audi does it, it's showing what is our path currently the path that company has done as the main is electrification.

56 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 35:01

Yes.

57 **ASA** 35:15

So the company has said and has stated we are going to leave combustion engines. We are aware that the previous 100 years in terms of technology, it was not possible to just leave it. We had not the technology there, but nowadays with the technology there and with a lot of new companies coming up and showing that it is possible, there are more and more for the coming years, there will be more and more innovations in terms of the concept of the electric car and the batteries.

So we are going fully electric. It's one of the statements that the company has had that by 2030 it wants to be completely electric and that's our purpose, to do the electrification of the vehicle because companies are more and more concerned with the Environmental Protection. So we are completely aware that there are climate changes happening all over the world. It's not just saying, this is always something very important. It's not just saying that it is the car industry, which is doing all of this, of course not. It is part of the problem, of course, but we also have numerous factories. Other ways of transport which are also affecting the climate all around the world. But the request was done worldwide to the car companies to reflect and to start doing something different. And that's what we are doing at Audi. We are going into a sustainable mode. We are thinking more and more to do climate protection.

More and more, we are looking into ways not only electrification but also other kinds of fuels which are less polluted on this way because it's not like for the previous 100 years we did it like this. So we can switch on one or two years. It's just not possible.

You really need to have some years and in Europe we have until 2035 to start changing, so we want to do it faster. That's why we went for the end of this decade to go completely electric, because we are aware that this is the transition that the

industry needs to do. It is not sustainable to continue like this and a part of that we are doing a lot of transformations also inside the company that we communicate in terms of for example how we get the energy to produce the cars that it's not coming also out of fossil fuels but from wind energy from solar energy at the factories. So that at a certain point we can say that we are an industry which is completely carbon neutral and this is a message that we want to convey to all of the customers in, in our reports. What are we doing and how much are we investing in producing batteries in developing new cars? Exiting thing to green energy not going to expensive materials, like leather and everything, but being more sustainable with that looking into new ways of producing fabrics, reusing a lot of the plastics. And this is something that it is already done within the company and more and more it will be done for the future and all of these messages we are completely transparent and not just saying, oh, we are going green, but we're not showing what we are doing and this is what we do with these reports. We try to show what is the path. How are we doing? How are we adapting? It will take years, of course, but it is a way...

58 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 39:22

You're working on it.

59 **ASA** 39:35y

60 Yeah, we are working on it and we want to achieve the goal to be carbon neutral by the end of this decade. And this is the whole thing that we are doing for social responsibility. All of the projects.

61 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 39:41

And do you think that so you already said some positive effects of like being transparent like digitally and also like with explaining how you're like doing all this corporate social responsibility work within the car, but also in your communities and to the world and you already, like you said like reputation can be positively influenced and you also mentioned trust. Can you think about more positive effects of transparent digital communication in the automotive industry?

62 **ASA** 40:33

I think if we are creative and an inspiring brand, we can bring a lot of trust regarding the work we are doing. Especially in times like these, which are times of a bit of uncertainty, we have the climate change, we just went out of a pandemic which changed a lot of the habits that everybody had. We had the crisis for a lot of materials. We are currently with two wars which are affecting the markets.

So in all of this, we live in kind of a fluke environment. So it's very volatile. You really need to adapt all the time.

63 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 41:15

Yes.

64 **ASA** 41:16

So that's you. You are constantly being agile and flexible in order for people to keep having trust in in what you're doing.

65 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 41:27

So you would say like the biggest effect would be then trust in the company while being transparent and that's almost like a main goal to ensure that your customers trust you?

66 **ASA** 41:36

Yes. Yes, yes, completely.

I think trust is one of the key factors and for reputation and for people to rely and to at least the see themselves as that brand.

67 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 41:47

Yes.

68 **ASA** 41:57

But once you convey all of those messages, people can really relate with it.

69 So trust it, it's a key factor.

70 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 42:05

OK. Thank you so much. And I just have like one more final question because our time is up almost, but I'm, but I'm really interested in and that's something I have asked all my interview like in my interviews. And I know it's not easy. It's like a challenge. So how would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication in just like one or two sentences.

71 **ASA** 42:34

How would I define the digital transparency?

OK. Let me see... So in a sentence let me just think about it. So in Audi, we would like we want to lead and to inspire people to make us a better brand because by saying this I'm saying that we are empowering people to also give us feedback so we can be a better brand.

72 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 44:11

Okay, yes, that's perfect.

Like empowering and feedback, those are keywords that I can use. Because at the end my goal will be to have like a definition and kind of everybody tells me keywords and I will use those keywords to build an own definition.

73 **ASA** 44:19

OK for sure.

74 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 44:34

I will just stop the recording.

1	Expert interview Alexandra Landers
2	8. April 2024, 11:08AM
3	25 Min. 46 Sec.
4	
5	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:09 Thank you so much. Perfect, let's start. Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry. This interview is going to be semi structured, which means that I have about 8 open questions. However, additional questions are also possible if a more detailed answer is needed. First, I would like to start with a personal question. Could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later?
6	Landers Alexandra, 0:45 Yes, I'm 53.
7	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:49 OK, perfect. Thank you. And can you briefly introduce yourself and your function in your company? For instance, what are your daily responsibilities and tasks?
8	Landers Alexandra 1:01 Ok, my name is Alexandra Landers. I'm the Global Head of Product Communications for the BMW brand. That means we are the international center of competence for all product related press topics. For example, the whole BMW brand portfolio, starting from the one series, Swiss series, The X family to the five and seven series. So the whole product portfolio currently on the market, and well, let's say the daily business is dealing with requests from media regarding a product related topics and as well as preparing let's say start off communications, pre-drives or international media launches of the products for a journalist.
9	Lara Cardoso Nunes 2:26 OK, perfect. Thank you so much. And the next questions are about your own personal view of viewpoint. So in your opinion, how has transparency been implemented into digital corporate

communication strategies of your company? So how have you been trying to be as transparent as possible in your corporate communications?

10 **Landers Alexandra** 2:53

Well, I think with having everything quite fast on social media and in the Internet you have to create a channel to give information, let's say your target groups the same of information at the same time. So normally we might try to use our so called Press Club where we are publishing our press releases and this press releases will be published worldwide.

So normally we have a, for example, a Press Club for Germany, where we published the messages in German. But there is also a Press Club in place, for example, for Portugal, where the Portuguese colleagues are translating this information into their language and sharing the same information for their media. But there is also a so called a global Press Club available where we are always publishing the information in English so well, let's say smaller countries not able to distribute the messages in their own language because let's say the country is too small. Normally they are always referring their media and target groups to the global Press Club.

11 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:34

Interesting.

12 **Landers Alexandra** 4:37

So I think this is one of our main transparency tools so that we can ensure and align our communications approach. So that our journalists and our target group are getting their information at the same time in their preferred language.

13 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 5:01

Perfect. And in your opinion, what importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency? Do you think they help or have they been kind of a challenge since they have arrived?

14 **Landers Alexandra** 5:17

Well, I think you have to. Let's say divide between a target group like media journalists or let's say automotive journalists, who are quite knowledgeable regarding our products and who have access to perhaps more detailed information and we exchange ideas and topics with them on a regular basis.

That's one part of the story, and the other part of the story is we would like to also reach with our corporate messages also our product messages that and that the company as a brand and also as a group is transforming and that topics like electromobility or sustainability are getting more and more important on the global level.

15 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 6:19

Yes. Good.

16 **Landers Alexandra** 6:20

On the corporate level, but also for product substance and therefore you are dealing with, let's say, the public and EA, what we see is that there is quite a difference between the knowledge, umm, a specialized target groups like media have and the public. And for the public, and especially younger target groups like students, young professionals, well, who grew up with an iPhone and an iPad and quite lots of electronic devices, they are currently a lot on social media. So, you can't negate that there is. There is no social media, you can just put aside.

So I think it's important to also get a message through these kind of networks and that means in the past you only had one channel, this channel was the media.

17 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 7:18

Yes.

18 **Landers Alexandra** 7:34

Now you have various channels. You have social media, you have social media like Twitter, like LinkedIn, like Facebook, but also video platforms like YouTube, where currently also lots of former journalists are publishing their content.

So they also swapped from only print to online, so let's see online is getting more and more important and for us, but we could experience is that in the past, if a person either it's a an influencer or a journalist are standing in front of a product and referring to their experience with regards to that product and they are streaming it either via YouTube or they are making a reel or posting photos on Instagram it's getting more and more important because the reach and is tremendous and they are also quite fast. So, you don't you don't have to wait for the monthly publication to be printed. You have it immediately on the road and so there are quite lots of advantages also to getting a message to a much broader audience in various countries worldwide.

19 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:07

It's true.

20 **Landers Alexandra** 9:11

And but on the other side, I think there are also some challenges because what we experience is that especially on some social media channels like Facebook also or Instagram, the engagement and also the comments...

21 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:31

Ah ja the feedback.

22 Landers Alexandra 9:44

Yes, the feedback is let's say sometimes more critical than we are used to when we are talking about a specialized target group. But also with this kind of feedback as a company you have live, you have to work with and you have to get better.

So you have to reach your target groups now on more different levels of communication. And yes, that's a challenge, but talking about transparency, it also reaches more people than we could reach in the past.

23 Lara Cardoso Nunes 10:11

That's true. And how do you think that the transparency level of your digital corporate communication influences the perception of your company's reputation among consumers, do you think that it has the power to influence it positively or like more you already said that there are some critical comments sometimes, but in general do you think it has the power to do something good like if you are transparent?

24 Landers Alexandra 10:43

I think it has, I think as a car manufacturer or let's say an automobile company aiming to transform the company to E-Mobility and to have more sustainable approaches also within the company, also focusing more on electric cars, yes, we have to reach this public and we have to use the positive effect of the digital age.

But yes, we also have to be prepared that perhaps the perception is not always positive. So we have to deal with and discuss with this kind of target groups and we also have to find new ways of communication, for example, new communication formats like getting in touch with people who aren't normally our target group.

And there are some formats already in place at the BMW Group, not just for, let's say, getting a more positive perception of the company but to get in touch with people outside of our reach and we called this, we call this format BMW exchange and the format I'm referring to is for example the rad hub where we are talking with startups, with students, with architects, with fashion people from the sustainable fashion making industry and lots of them, they don't even know which products we are producing. Just perhaps the let's say the edges, but it's so important for us if we are talking about the future and the transformation of the company, it's so important to know what this kind of people are thinking so that we can also integrate this in our strategic approach. And this is perhaps something else we are discussing for, let's say the brands and the products we will have in 10 years. Then we would have discussed with them 20 years ago, it changed dramatically and I think all this new devices, the Internet of thing and transparency also in digital communication is one key for this for this strategic shift.

25 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:42

Perfect. The next question I'm very interested now that you're in your position as global head of product communication. Like in your opinion, to what extent does detailed product information contribute to the perception of transparency?

What I mean with product information would be, what do you think about communicating the supply chain so being transparent in the supply chain or what kind of material is used to produce the cars online, how do you feel about that?

26 **Landers Alexandra** 14:25

I think, within BMW and just let's say on the road to the so-called Neue Klasse. This is a perfect question because, when we are thinking about launching new products, we currently have a so called circular approach.

So yes, about the supply chain and also the sourcing strategy and the especially with let's say the new regulations in place in Europe, for suppliers and our let's say awareness as a manufacturer for making sure that the supply chain is a sustainable and also meets the current legislation, it's getting more and more important.

So it's not only about the product anymore, it's a 360 degree approach from let's say the strategy phase where we are already thinking about for example changing materials from let's say leather seats to sustainable materials. Not only let's say, substitutes, but perhaps also other materials we can use. So these are quite important things. Also, let's say reducing plastic using perhaps other materials you can better reduce or recycle. And this is currently a quite important topic for the car industry as whole and also for the BMW brand.

27 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:33

Ok, thank you. And does your company publish corporate social responsibility reports? And if yes, how do you think that that can contribute to the perceived transparency of the company?

28 **Landers Alexandra** 16:49

Yes, we do publish a corporate social responsibility report.

We also publish it online. That means digitally only, just to reduce paper and every person is able to download it and have a look at it.

29 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:01

Very good.

30 **Landers Alexandra** 17:11

And it's also an integrated report and I think yes, there you can find lots of detailed information and that you perhaps didn't know about the company and about the efforts we are doing regarding corporate sustainability and also regarding product

related sustainability but also economic and ecological aspects of our work, and it's also a report we already received several awards for.

31 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:37

Oh, interesting!

32 **Landers Alexandra** 17:49

So easy to check out.

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:50

And now I would like to know, thinking about the future and also current challenges, what do you see as the positive effects of transparent digital communication right now and what do you think could be a challenge in the future in the future?

34 **Landers Alexandra** 18:18

Well, I think currently what we are often discussing is the role that artificial intelligence is playing.

35 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 18:36

Yes, good!

36 **Landers Alexandra** 18:39

And as I said with, let's say digital communication, there are lots of advantages also for companies to use artificial intelligence for their work. Just to make it easier also for people to work with as a way to help them, but there are also challenges and I think we definitely need some laws and regulations for the usage of artificial intelligence. Well, it's always the case if you have some positives, you also have some negatives and for sure we are currently also seeing lots of pictures or let's say also articles already generated with AI and you can feed them lots of information you have and they are producing a picture and then you really have to check is this a fake picture or is this a picture you did release as a company? Let's say the positive effects, of supporting you in your work gets to a negative effect when its let's say using the information you already have to make something which isn't true. And there are quite some challenges I think, especially focusing on photos but also text, generated from lets say journaists that are not even there, but saying a AI person doing this article, so definitely and I think we are just at the at the beginning, we need some premises in place, as I said, rules and regulations. How we can manage this. Currently it's not this easy and I think this will become much more challenging in the future because it's a learning system.

37 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 20:58

Yes. It's learning by doing.

38 **Landers Alexandra** 21:07

So now the more information you are giving the system, the more experienced it gets and the more real it really gets. So yeah, there are definitely some things we have to think about.

39 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 21:29

Yeah.

40 **Landers Alexandra** 21:29

I read that you can do an interview, perhaps with AI? A person completely in another language and the person is not even able to speak that language.

This is getting kind of weird though when I'm thinking about let's say HR people having one or two interviews to recruit people and you can completely use this as a way to sell yourself as a different person.

41 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 21:50

It is.

42 **Landers Alexandra** 22:06

So there are for sure some challenges ahead.

43 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 22:07

Let's see. Yeah, but what I saw on the account of BMW on Instagram, they did a campaign with a virtual influencer. The little mikila thing with the iX2 and I have that example in my thesis because I really liked how it is a new world with new possibilities.

44 **Landers Alexandra** 22:19

Yes, yeah, yeah.

45 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 22:34

And just like being creative with it and trying it out, I really like that approach that they had. So that's always a good thing, when I asked about the trends and people say AI, because I really think it's an interesting topic.

46 **Landers Alexandra** 22:48

Yeah, I think we also used to use this influencer also for the mini brand, but yes, it was in the advertisements for the iX2 and the X2 and it was quite successful because it's really I think if you would have asked someone that an AI generated influencer has, I don't know how many followers already. Some years ago, everyone would have said, well, I can't believe it or I don't think so.

47 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 23:02

Yeah, it's crazy.

48 **Landers Alexandra** 23:17

Yeah, but it's a new world and I think if you would like to play a role in that world, you have to try out new things. And that's 1 of them. And definitely with this kind of advertisement, that's not my expertise. This is more than Marketing people doing that, but in using this kind of influences or new models, you are also getting more and more interest in the younger target group you would like to reach and to interest in your products. So it's not one size fits all, it's just finding the right tools for the right target groups.

49 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 24:01

That's true. Thank you so much and I have one last question that I have been asking this everyone that I have entered interviews with, and sometimes it's a little bit of a challenge. So, I would like to know if you could define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication.

50 **Landers Alexandra** 24:53

Well, let's say for me, transparency is to get, let's say, the same information, out to the public at the same time, to all people.

51 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 25:20

So to have the information available for every person also online?

52 **Landers Alexandra** 25:20

Yes, to have it available for everyone at the same time, with the same let's say a content of information.

53 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 25:34

OK, perfect.

Thank you so much.

1	Expert interview DSM
2	23. April 2024, 01:59PM
3	31 Min. 56 Sec.
4	
5	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:10 OK. So thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry. This interview is going to be semi structured, which means that I have about 8 open questions. However, additional questions are also possible if a more detailed answer is needed, and then what I would kindly ask you is to when you're answering my questions, to think about the German brand in general.
6	DSM 0:28 OK.
7	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:45 So not just like the communication in Portugal, but like the whole communication of the company.
8	DSM 0:47 Yeah. OK.
9	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:51 So I would start with the personal question 1st; could you please tell me your age for my demographic evaluation later please.
10	DSM 1:00 Of course, I'm 27 years old, almost 28.
11	Lara Cardoso Nunes 1:04 OK, perfect. And how long have you been working for Mercedes?
12	DSM 1:16 One year I started in March 2, 2023.
13	So yes, one year and one month.

14 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 1:24

And could you briefly introduce yourself and your function and your company, for instance, what are your daily responsibilities and tasks?

15 **DSM** 1:34

Yes, of course.

So I'm the *(deleted from this transcript)* for the Portuguese market and I'm responsible for all the press releases that we send to the media. I'm the *(deleted from this transcript)* for Mercedes Benz here in Portugal. It means that when it comes to interviews, talk or round tables, it's supposed that that I go to that to do the talks and interviews and stuff like that, because in the ultimate instance and I'm responsible for all the things that the brand does. Ok, so I need to know everything about the brand. At least It's supposed to be like that. But sometimes I need the help of my colleagues from the product team.

16 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 2:52

Yes, to get all the information.

17 **DSM** 2:52

Yes! It's very important in my job and then I have the responsibility of all the branded content so and everything that is branded content, I'm the responsible. I don't know if you know what branded content is, but it's most it's an important part from the communication from our brand communication campaigns. But not the typical TV commercials that you see on TV or on newspapers. It's something more structured and something more, more efficient in our way to think. And one more thing I'm also responsible for the Mercedes ME magazine. It's a magazine that we sent to our customers and some journalists, but for customers essentially.

18 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 3:56

Is that also published online or how do they get it?

19 **DSM** 4:06

We published the PDF on our site, but it's not an online magazine.

20 It's mostly a print magazine, so I think our focus here is on print not on digital because it's for customers and most of them like the paper.

21 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:14

Yeah, to get it on their hands.

22 **DSM** 4:34

Yes, yes, yes.

- 23 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:36
And so I guess that could also be kind of a tool to appear more transparent, right, like because you probably are going to present a lot of information about the company and the new products there, right?
- 24 **DSM** 4:48
Yes.
- 25 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:50
So would you see it as an instrument that you use to like to communicate better with stakeholders because of that?
- 26 **DSM** 4:56
Yes, yes, of course, of course, because it's important. It's very important for the transparency part, so yes.
- 27 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 5:05
Thank you. I would start with the first question in connection with my thesis and the first would be that I would like to have your opinion in how transparency, and we kind of already mentioned it, how it should be implemented into digital corporate communication strategies of automotive companies?
And if you want you can also give me an example how Mercedes does it.
But like just in general, how do you think that that should be implemented digitally or like online?
- 28 **DSM** 5:41
So, for example, in every trimester, we communicate various results like our sales results.
I'm talking about all the company, not only the Portuguese company, all of our companies in the world, all of Mercedes Benz companies in in the world publish the results of sales every trimester and I think that that it's very important.
I think it's really good because not every brand does that.
- 29 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 6:20
It is! And can you please elaborate?
- 30 **DSM** 6:28
So I think it's a part of our transparency.
It's very important and so this magazine is an important part of that too, because we publish articles about what we are doing.

31 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 6:43

Interesting!

32 **DSM** 6:48

Yeah. And also what our most important events are, our events with media and with customers, so we publish a lot of stuff about what we are doing, what we've been doing in in all the departments, in events, in public relations, in sales etc.

So I think it's a very important part too, especially because... and I know you know that, and everyone knows that but the sustainability part is very important nowadays more than ever in the automotive industry.

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 7:26

Yes!

34 **DSM** 7:32

So we are trying to promote that and to publish results. Efficient results in physical results and not only talking about our sustainability, but also show with numbers...

35 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 7:49

What you're actually do.

36 **DSM** 7:50

Yeah. What we are actually doing, and I think it's very important because our company is very preoccupied about that and we publish results every three months about our sustainability goals or about the sustainability goals that we have achieved.

37 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 8:13

That's interesting because one of my main questions was going to be like how the publication of like a Corporate Social Responsibility report that you probably are putting all together. So are you putting the corporate social responsibility topic and the financial stuff all in one or is this like separate reports?

38 **DSM** 8:36

No, no, no. It's separately, yes, yes.

39 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 8:40

And when you talk about corporate social responsibility, do you like think that that really contributes to the perceived transparency of your company or in general of automotive companies when they publish that? So, like about sustainability and all the efforts like the ones you were mentioning. When you publish that, do you really think that that contributes positively to the perceived transparency?

40 **DSM** 9:07

Yes, of course.

And we in that case I think it's very important that we really need to continue with this because it's very, very, very, very important for all the people that trust in our brand.

41 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:39

That's a very good point.

42 **DSM** 9:41

Yes, because we need to show those people what we are doing and that we are effectively doing something not only the taking around things and usual things but that we are actually doing something and I think it's very important to show that.

43 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:52

Yes. What other positive effects of like being that transparent like publishing a financial numbers, publishing what you're doing for sustainability, like doing that online, what kind of positive effects do you hope to have besides transparency and trust? Can you think about other positive effects?

44 **DSM** 10:24

The perception of our brand becomes better.

And one thing that we want, I think it's one of the things that we want the most, is that our brand becomes the most valuable and has the best perception in the market. So in that point of view, I think it helps a lot.

45 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 10:51

So you mean corporate reputation?

46 **DSM** 10:53

Yes, yes, yes.

Reputation. Yes, of course. The value of our brand could increase with that. I think really, the most important is the trust that we can give to our clients. This perception of our brand, the transparency, because all of the companies nowadays want to be more transparent that is possible. think it's these three things that are the most important.

47 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 11:47

And what importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency, like what kind of networks does Mercedes use and how important do you think that they are to not only appear transparent, but really being transparent?

- 48 **DSM** 12:10
OK, so we publish in our media sites and in our we have a sustainability websites. We publish that a lot. A lot of the relevant things. So I think mostly our websites, our social media, but mostly the websites because in social media we need to be careful.
- 49 So we need to we need to have extremely care about what we published. So I think the best platform to publish that kind of things, I think it's our websites because we are a German company but we are a multinational.
- 50 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:05
And it's your own channel like you can control what information you put, but do you still think because you say you have to be careful, it's probably because of the possible option of feedback on social media?
- 51 **DSM** 13:09
Yes, of course.
- 52 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:20
And what's your opinion on that?
Like I I've heard from other interviews that they also are like...they like it, but...people need to be careful. What's your thought on that?
- 53 **DSM** 13:35
Yes, because social media it's a world that is changing every day and I think we need to be careful not only with that but with the people that have a hateful thought inside, so not the ones that are genuinely criticizing, but people like to go to social media and to talk bad about everything.
- 54 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:57
Yeah.
- 55 **DSM** 14:07
Not just because they don't like something. No, it's mostly because they say I don't like this because I just don't like it and that's my opinion. And yeah, that's my opinion, so deal with it.
- 56 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:18
Yeah, there's no real reason behind it.
- 57 **DSM** 14:20
So I think social media is a strange world.
A really strange world and you need to be careful because of that, and also because

that feedback that we talked, that can put our company in in danger? I don't know if danger is the best word but like it can put our company in “bad sheets”.

58 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:52

Yeah, so in jeopardy.

59 **DSM** 15:11

Yes.

60 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:52

Yeah, so in jeopardy.

61 I also feel like there's a really high risk of also having like a shitstorm because people.

Then it's sometimes like all the bad focus is on just one thing, but probably the majority of people would not even see that the same negative way, but they are just silent, and on the other hand the people that see it negative, they are all coming out.

62 **DSM** 15:11

Yes.

63 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 15:19

And so I know what you mean.

64 **DSM** 15:21

Yes, of course. And just for you to have a better idea, when we publish things about sustainability and about our cars. That have for example, 40% of recycle recycled materials and that kind of stuff we say numbers, we talk about numbers, we don't talk only about things in general, we really have numbers to show. And people comment bad things even with the numbers there and even with proof.

65 So I think for the automotive industry, the sustainability part, it's very tricky, very, very is very, very, very tricky.

66 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:17

But a good point about sustainability in the cars. Because one of my next questions would be that I would like to know that how, in your opinion to what extent does the provision like or providing detailed information about the product.

So for example like providing information about the sustainability like for example, the that leather used is sustainable or that care was taken that the supply chain is also transparent.

How do you think that giving all of this information to your stakeholders, especially

consumers, how does that influence the perception of transparency and corporate reputation? What's your opinion on that?

67 **DSM** 17:22

I think it's very important because people need to know what we are actually doing and not only what we are trying to do, what we think that we would go, what we could do in the future. I think transparency needs numbers.

OK, in in this industry, transparency needs numbers and needs proof.

I think without numbers we can talk about everything we want and that for my point of view, that's not what matters. That's not important because I can talk about everything. Don't give you numbers. Don't give you anything and you can believe in it. You can believe in me and believe in what I'm saying, but in the in the end of the day, that could be an error and that could be not the truth. And you don't even know so.

68 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 18:33

Yeah, it's true.

I really like the statement you made about needing proof and numbers. You need to like show that you're not just communicating, and doing Marketing, but like that you're really like walking the talk.

Like there's this saying.

69 **DSM** 18:53

Yes.

70 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 18:53

So I really like that thought that you had about that.

But when you think about like the online environment, what current challenges do you see of like transparent digital corporate communication at the moment?

71 **DSM** 19:10

I think the social media are the biggest challenge for us, publishing on social media and talking with our clients and with our fans on social media, I think it's very difficult and it's a challenge for me, it's the biggest challenge.

72 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 19:37

And in the future?

73 **DSM** 19:41

And indeed also in the future.

74 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 19:41

Also?

75 **DSM** 19:41

76 Also, yes! I'm young, so you know, I'm also on it but yeah, yeah definitely a challenge.

77 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 19:51

Yeah, we young people do use it on a daily basis.

78 **DSM** 19:54

Yeah, but I think it's a Social channel that will cause us problems in the future.

I do not want to be the bad person that I has bad thoughts about everything.

It's not that, but I'm not really confident that social media will provide us very good things and that in the future we can only use that has an information channel.

Lara Cardoso Nunes 20:37

So they also think that there's always a need for more, not only social media, not only website. You always need to like add different types of content?

79 **DSM** 20:45

Yes, I think you need to look at this the media, like the TV channels and newspapers, the magazines, you need to look at these media with the other eyes and think that they have the good information. They mostly have the real information, the verified information. And I think we, uh, we almost forgot where we can pick up the best information and the good information.

80 I think we are a little bit lost in that and I think we can't forget about that because it's where it's where the real information is.

81 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 21:42

Yeah, that's a really good point.

And then what I would also like to ask you is like in general so not only transparency related. I mean it could be but in general, the future of digital corporate communication, where what do you see like happening there?

82 **DSM** 22:13

I see big, big conferences, big talks, big events with more than just some people from a company. I think it's not only about some important people from a company, but about all of the people that work in a company that need to show their point of view need to show what they do, what they like, what they dislike, what they really

think about the company. Because when you see as CEP or a spokesperson from a brand talk about that brand and the achievements and that stuff you think ok that's good, that's perfect. But something is missing...

83 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 23:19

Yeah what about the employees?

84 **DSM** 23:22

This is their job and it's this is a person that when you look at the CEO, you think, Oh my God, this person, It's his job and he has received a lot of money every month and you don't really trust that person.

85 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 23:42

Yeah.

86 **DSM** 23:43

You need to look at an simple employee and I think when you when you hear and when you see that person talk about their point of view about the company, you can relate more and you can trust more. And I think it's all about in that point is all about trust. You need to trust in a company to buy something, especially in this industry.

so more in the automotive industry, I think you need to trust the brand.

87 Besides everything you need to trust what you what you buy and if OK, you can trust in the CEO in a spokesperson.

But I think you will trust in the guy that is responsible for software of the littlest digital thing inside of the radio. I don't know, but so I think it will be good.

88 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 24:50

Because you also can relate to that person.

89 **DSM** 24:56

I think talks and conferences in a way in not in the traditional way.

You know, and that that traditional way that you have round table and talk to one person and then the other, no, I think we need to make a revolution in that kind of talks and conferences to make their more interactive with the public and not so straight.

90 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 25:25

Yeah, and that could happen then online as well.

- 91 **DSM** 25:29
Of course, of course.
I think online it's very important. You can have a webinar or something like that.
- 92 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 25:35
Exactly!
- 93 **DSM** 25:37
Yes, in a very with a very creative way. We need to think about something really different in the area of corporate communication, because nowadays, we do the basic things; we make statements, we send the press release with the statements from the important people in the company and of course we show numbers, and that kind of stuff is important. But it's always the same format.
And here at Mercedes, we are trying to make it more revolutionary.
- Lara Cardoso Nunes** 26:05
Yeah, to think outside the box and I guess also being more creative. Do you have more examples?
- 94 **DSM** 26:24
More, yes, and because every year, for example, we have the ESG conference, it's a conference about sustainability where the important things from our management board is presented. And where people talk about our goals, our achievements, everything related to sustainability. But this mainly for our most important customers and most important media. And so this is a conference online, in a completely the different format than having a person talk Infront of a PowerPoint. So Mercedes is trying to do something different and I think it's a step by step process. We will still have our press releases. We will still have our articles in our websites and sometimes also in social media and but we are trying to make more things and that conference for example, I think it's an example of that.
It's an example that we are trying to do different things and to show the results in a different way and to more people.
Yes, because with that digital conferences you can achieve a lot of more people.
- 95 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 28:16
Yes, a lot more. That's true. Like, that's a good an example.
- 96 I'm already at my final question and that would be and it's a little challenge, so if you need a little time to think, there's no problem or if you need like my help because what I would like you to give me is like a small definition of transparency

in the context of digital corporate communication. And it's also ok if you just like brainstorm out loud. Do you want to try it?

97 **DSM** 29:26

Yes. So transparency in digital corporate communication.

98 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 30:32

Exactly.

99 **DSM** 30:33

OK, so. It's important to show results, numbers and proof in order to have the trust of your customers and clients, all stakeholders. And I think what is most important, is that you need to make them trust you, so you need to become digital. Since digital is the most important way that you can make that happen.

10 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 31:29

0 Perfect.

10 **DSM** 31:29

1 I don't know if I if enough?

10 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 31:29

2 Yes it is! Thank you so much.

1 Expert interview MSB

2 25. April 2024, 11:07AM

3 17 Min. 40 Sec.

4

5 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 0:07

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry. I'm going to ask you 8 semi structured open questions. So if there is an additional question that I feel like I should ask, I will ask but it's not mandatory to answer all of them. So you always can tell me to skip one.

I would start with a personal question first and that would be, if could you could please briefly introduce yourself and your function currently in your company like for example what are your daily asks and responsibilities?

6 **MSB** 0:50

Sure, I started my new assignment in January. I'm working now XXX. We produce power engines and turbines Airplanes.

Airbus is our biggest partner and then customer and I started my new assignment as (*deleted from this transcript*). So my department is the lead for all the marketing communications, the corporate and board Member communications and the branch of public affairs in the meaning of political affairs.

7 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 1:37

Ok thank you, very interesting. And for my demographic evaluation later, could you please tell me your age?

8 **MSB** 1:45

Something between 25 and 50...., so it's 46.

9 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 1:51

Ok. Thank you.

And so then I would start with the questions related to my thesis topic and the first one would be how was transparency implemented into the digital corporate communication strategies in your previous work like when you were working with the German automotive company?

10 **MSB** 2:18

And let me think about that question. Transparency is gaining much more importance, no question about that. And the I And now, in the last years, I guess they recognized that they have to open their doors and deliver more transparency, into the direction to their stakeholders, employees, shareholders, customers and the so-called broad public. Because people want to know what the companies are doing and what is their so-called license to operate. And so the target is transparency and to gain more trust, right?

11 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 3:43

And online, how do you think that you tried to do that?

12 **MSB** 3:56

Well, there were several stakeholder dialogue formats implemented where Stakeholders were invited into the company and during the COVID-pandemic, it was fully virtually so it was digital, it was a digital stakeholder dialogue and then I would say social media is a is a way for more transparency and dialogue as well.

13 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:31

Yes, to get feedback and what more?

14 **MSB** 4:36

Exactly to get feedback and to get to know what people outside the company are thinking about, the company and the business model.

15 And well, transparency within the company is quite important as well.

When we're talking about an employee app or an in Intranet with dialogue function and lots of dialogue formats within the company as well, while the board members are talking to or with the employees, all digital during Corona pandemic and now I guess things are normalizing and are taking place in in the real world more and more.

16 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 5:14

That's a really good point. Thank you so much.

My second question would be, how do you think that the transparency level of digital corporate communication influences positively the perception of the company's reputation among consumers and also other stakeholders?

So do you think first, do you think it has a positive impact or do you also think it can have a negative impact? What's your thought on that?

17 **MSB** 6:02

It can have a negative aspect as well. Transparency means that everyone out there

can learn more about your strong but also about your weak sides as well, and so transparency means and a really realistic view on the things and maybe there are things where companies used to hide away, and now they share their information and in the long run, transparency leads to more trust and trust is the most valuable currency in my ways when we're talking about communication and stakeholder management.

18 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 6:59

19 And what are other positive effects that transparent to digital corporate communication can have from your point of view besides trust and also influencing corporate reputation? Can you think about the others?

20 **MSB** 7:18

So we could think about employer branding that maybe people out there who never thought that the company could be an attractive employer and now and I have the chance to get the whole truth and say ohh wow that's a interesting company and it fits to my personal way of thinking or living. So why not?
Let's see If I can work there so to say.

21 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 7:58

Oh yes that's a really good point! Like also be more competitive against others for like being able to recruit the best candidates for a job position. So that's definitely a positive effect that transparency can have for sure.

22 **MSB** 8:13

And to be honest, every human being and every company as well as well, has strong sides and weak sides. So, truth is part of the real life.

23 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 8:27

Yeah, definitely. And my next question, because we are going through the questions really quick, would be that I would like to know in your opinion to what extent does the provision of detailed product information contribute to the perception of transparency like online? For example, I've seen that it's getting like a trend to say, oh, we're very we have sustainable supply chain, and we are using sustainable products and our cars and like going very into depth about that topic.
And do you think that is a good thing to like give all this product information to the stakeholders?

24 **MSB** 9:16

It depends on who you are asking the question. From a customer perspective. Yes, it is a positive thing, from the corporate perspective, It's full of risks and because

especially when we're talking about the supply chain. Supply chain in the automotive industry is full of challenges I would say. And so it's really risky for a company to deliver full transparency.

25 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:47

Yes.

26 **MSB** 9:55

But on the other hand, it's a really big chance. If you were on good sides and you can give proof to that and tell everyone, look here you can read it. And we're really doing our best and we are free of mistakes despite all the challenges.

And so I would support the idea to invent an idea like a transparency car pass or something.

27 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 10:31

And staying in the topic of sustainability, because I also know that you have experience in that topic and how does, in your opinion the publication of Corporate Social Responsibility reports and tribute to the perceived transparency of an automotive company? And did your previous company do that?

28 **MSB** 10:54

I would say the corporate sustainability report is the basis for further communication. On the first hand, I would say no one reads the corporate sustainability report because it is long, I don't know, but 400 pages or something like this is long but it's the source of truth and a very valuable source for further responsibility communications via social media, via press releases, via dialogues and so on.

So it's worth it and it's really worth it while you have to do this because the European regulations oblige the companies to publish this report and I would say it's worth it. You have to use it for as a source for your further communications.

29 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 12:24

And how would you say it's like the best to promote this report online?

Where should it be published? So that people maybe are interested in reading it?

30 **MSB** 12:37

I would say BMW is a very good example. They transformed the sustainability report into an integrated corporate report and this is important because the key message behind is that sustainability is in the midst the company. It's nothing besides the company. It is in mid of the company, so they have an integrated report with our financial figures and our sustainability and responsibility figures as well.

So this is the first key message. Very, very important.

The second is that they translated it into a very hands-on and in a very snackable content with lots of images and animations, Videos and texts, that are written in a way that everyone can understand them and they published it via the corporate website. And fostered the communication via social media and so on.

So this is in my perspective a perfect approach. This multi-media corporate report.

31 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 14:28

Makes sense, thank you for that information. And now looking at a more broader view of digital corporate communication, what trends do you see in the future?

32 **MSB** 14:43

That would be, of course, artificial intelligence. It is really turning everything around and I don't know exactly how what this pending image means, but it will turn everything around. It will be a revolution for the whole media landscape and so for the digital communications landscape as well. This is the one thing.

On the other hand, I think the dialogue is getting more and more important.

The real dialogue between human beings, because we want communication that works between human beings, and this is the original way.

We are all longing for and looking for that. And so, besides this digital communications world with artificial intelligence, I have to perception that the real dialogue between human beings is getting more and more important as well.

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:23

Yeah, that's definitely true!

And my final question, is it a little of a challenge or at least some of my interviews have told me that it's not that easy to answer directly.

I would like you to, if you can and of course if you want, to define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication in one or two sentences? Do you want to try it?

34 **MSB** 17:15

I would give an answer right away. Transparency is a key factor for successful digital communication.

35 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:17

Yeah. Perfect.

That's awesome.

Thank you so much. I will stop the recording now.

1	Expert interview FHB
2	22. Mai 2024, 11:07AM
3	18 Min. 13 Sec.
4	
5	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:10
6	<p>Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions about the topic, transparency, and the digital corporate communication of the German automotive industry. I'm going to ask you 8 semi structured open questions. However, it's not mandatory to answer all of them. So, If you do not want to answer one of them you can always tell me to skip the question. What can also happen is that I adapt the order to the course of the conversation. Ok?</p>
7	FHP 0:40
8	Yes.
9	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:42
10	I would like to start with a personal question. Could you please tell me about your age for my demographic evaluation?
11	FHP 0:46
12	Sure, I am 29 years old.
13	Lara Cardoso Nunes 0:48
14	Thank you. Now, could you please briefly introduce yourself and your function in your current company?
15	FHP 1:03
16	So, as a Director & Head of Innovation I am responsible for the development of sales and marketing strategies, end-to-end negotiation for sales, partnerships, and collaboration opportunities. In this role, the aim is to expand the current business areas by developing scalable products and sales strategy in the various markets and customer groups, for example C-Level focus.
17	Lara Cardoso Nunes 2:05
18	But you are also a communication expert or consultant in the automotive sector, right?

19 **FHP** 2:16

20 Yes, I also have Expertise in the area of the reorganization of communication and marketing units like Corporate Communications, Public Affairs & Marketing. Where I work towards integrated organizations and the integration of Communication, Marketing and Technological solutions.

21 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 3:05

22 Very interesting! And how long have you been doing this?

23 **FHP** 3:09

24 I think, for about 7 years.

25 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 3:14

26 Okay perfect, thank you. I would like to start now with my main questions. So, in your opinion, how should transparency be implemented into the digital corporate communication strategies of automotive companies?

27 **FHP**3:30

28 So, in my opinion, automotive companies should focus on open and honest communication, as well as stakeholder engagement, and ethical practices. Regular updates and clear messaging across digital platforms are also able to build trust. Then, interactive platforms encourage feedback and discussions, while clear privacy policies and proactive crisis management enhance accountability. I also think that detailed product information, transparent pricing, and supply chain transparency further demonstrate ethical practices. As you realize, streamlining these efforts, could ensure, at least in my opinion, a consistent and transparent approach in all digital communications.

29 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:43

30 Does are really good points, that I also have come across in my research as well. Now, as you know, social media is getting more and more important. Which online channels should automotive companies use when planning their social media strategy?

31 **FHP** 5:02

32 Well, a combination of different channels. So, for example, the company website, social networks, but only those where active usage is authentic from the company's perspective. Like, in my opinion not everyone company has to use tiktok. But additionally, automotive companies should use press portals, blogs, and regularly keep email contact.

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 6:25

34 That's a really good point, with the authentic usage of social media channels. But in general, what importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency?

35 **FHP** 6:34

36 It's very important. So social media channels enable real-time communication and direct engagement with a wide audience. And they also allow companies to quickly share updates, respond to feedback, and address concerns publicly. You understand? I really think that they therefore are crucial for transparency.

37 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 7:04

38 I do understand yes. Thank you. Now, with regarding the topic corporate reputation. I would like to know if you think that the transparency level of digital corporate communication influences positively the perception of a company's reputation among consumers? So for example that having a transparent communication could have as an positive effect a better corporate reputation?

39 **FHP** 7:57

40 Yes I think, well to first to be able to achieve that, the need is high transparency in digital corporate communication. Like overall. If that is given, it will positively influence a company's reputation by building trust and credibility with consumers and shareholders, in my opinion at least.

41 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 8:31

42 Interesting I really like your tough of process. Could you please further elaborate? Like why does that happen?

43 **FHP** 8:36

44 Yes sure. This is because, when a company openly shares information about its operations, decision-making processes, and responses to issues, it demonstrates accountability and honesty. This openness reassures consumers that the company is reliable and ethical, leading to increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.

45 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:36

46 Yeah for sure.

47 **FHP**9:37

- 48 Further, transparency also helps mitigate the impact of negative events, as consumers are more likely to forgive mistakes if they believe the company is being forthright and responsible. Right?
- 49 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 10:29
- 50 Well, yes you named very good points! Can you think about other or more factors that could positively influence the company's reputation online besides being transparent?
- 51 **FHP** 10:46
- 52 Sure! So, for one, offering customer Service Excellence and then also Innovation, Testimonials and overall consistency in story telling across various channels.
- 53 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 11:03
- 54 Well put in a nutshell! Thank you... We'll go straight on to the next question, if that's okay. So, when it comes to communication product information, in your opinion, how important is the provision of detailed product information and how does it contribute to the perception of transparency in the automotive industry?
- 55 **FHP** 11:19
- 56 So, I think that it greatly enhances transparency in the automotive industry by building trust..... credibility, and customer engagement.
- 57 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 12:02
- 58 Why exactly do you think that?
- 59 **FHP** 12:05
- 60 So the way I see it, providing information allows consumers to make informed decisions, demonstrates honesty, and showcases the company's commitment to safety and regulatory compliance. You know? And this transparency, from my point of view at least, fosters a positive reputation and also strengthens customer relationships.
- 61 **FHP** 12:35
- 62 I completely agree with you! Can you also please briefly summarize what you think are the positive effects of transparent online communication from your point of view in the automotive industry? For example, what are reasons why automotive companies should be transparent?
- 63 **FHP**12:46

- 64 That's easy. So, for one, enhanced reputation, than transparent communication can lead to informed decision making and another positive effect or reason would be that it can be used for crisis management.
- 65 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:13
- 66 Interesting! You have definitely mentioned new positive points that I did not hear until now. Can you also think of challenges of transparent corporate communication in the digital world?
- 67 **FHP** 13:32
- 68 In the digital era, transparent corporate communication faces several challenges. Well, firstly, the huge amount of information available leads to an overload of information. Secondly, companies have to comply with numerous regulatory requirements and regulations. What else? Well, what comes to mind is that data privacy concerns are also a major challenge these days, as sensitive information must be protected while maintaining transparency. And then, real-time communication requires companies to respond quickly and efficiently to requests and specific situations. That can also be a challenge. Exactly... that's what comes to my mind.
- 69 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 15:04
- 70 That is true. There are always pros and cons, and it often depends on how companies react and how important they consider how issue is to be addressed. But besides challenges, what trends do you see for the future of digital corporate communications? Can you name a few that come immediately to your mind?
- 71 **FHP** 15:20
- 72 Sure! So, the biggest topic right now, would be the increased use of AI and automation. How that influences corporate communication, well. It would be for example the possibility to improve personalized communication and customer service. Another trend would be the enhanced interactivity with consumers. And I guess, also there is also the trend to give data-driven insights along the entire communicative workflow. And while I am taking about this, the next thing in connection with this would be the integration of emerging technologies. Which means a higher blockchain usage for transparency and security of communications. Have you heard about this?
- 73 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:32
- 74 Yes, it's funny that you list that! I actually go into it briefly in my literature section, like how blockchain is used to achieve transparency. A very interesting topic, even if complex. Okay, due to time constraints, I would ask the next question straight

away. It's also my last question and I'm always very curious to know how my interview partners answer it.

75 **FHP** 16:51

76 I am curious to hear the question now.

77 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 16:56

78 It's not difficult. I would just like to know how would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication?

79 **FHP** 17:04

80 Ah yes. I will try to make it short and simple but let me think about it for a moment.

81 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:10

82 Yes sure!

83 **FHP** 17:30

84 Okay so a definition could be for example that transparency in digital corporate communication means providing clear, honest, and accessible information about company operations, decisions, and policies to all stakeholders. Does this work?

85 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 18:00

86 Wow! This is really very accurate and comes very close to definitions in research. Thank you very much for your great answers! I look forward to evaluating them.

87 **FHP** 18:10

88 Sure, no problem. I hope my answers will help you.

1 Expert interview HBV

2 23. Mai 2024, 08:59AM

3 19 Min. 49 Sek.

4

5 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 0:26

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions about digital corporate communications in the German automotive industry. This interview will be semi-structured. I have about eight open questions, but additional questions are also possible if a more detailed answer is desired. My first question would be if you could briefly introduce yourself? So what are your current functions and job position? You also have a lot of experience in the automotive industry. Maybe you could elaborate on this a little further?

6 **HBV** 0:33

Mhm well, where should we start?

7 Well, to finish with, the last thing I did was that I was a Group spokesperson for the Volkswagen Group, which now only consists of 12 brands out of 13.

8 All automotive companies, of course, and I was responsible for a team of 250 people in Germany and almost 1000 worldwide.

9 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 1:02

Great, that sounds very, very interesting. And how long would you describe your experience in the automotive industry and in communications in general?

10 **HBV** 1:12

Do I have to talk about my age?

11 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 1:14

No If you do not want to, but, for example, how much year's of work experience do you have in general?

12 **HBV** 1:15

No, that was a joke. I have over 30 years and all in the automotive industry.

13 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 1:25

Okay, great, thank you very much, then I'll start straight away with my thesis questions, namely how is transparency implemented in the digital corporate communication of an automotive company?

14	HBV 1:28 Yes, okay a difficult field.
15	Lara Cardoso Nunes 1:46 Yes, definitely complex.
16	HBV 1:48 So let's start with Volkswagen, which perhaps had a special position in the end because the diesel scandal took the issue of transparency to another level. Before that, one or two things may not have been completely opaque, let's say, but they weren't completely transparent. Then an agreement was reached with the American authorities, which resulted in a lively program and the company's compliance guidelines were then completely tightened again, which of course also meant that communication had to change completely, because from then on, the idea of transparency was completely different from what it had been before. From then on, everything became public. Well, digital communication is generally always public, but of course it has to be checked and I think that's the important thing in the company, that we now work very closely with the legal department, compliance department etc. in order to be able to classify all issues correctly.
17	In the past, in a rather non-digital world, you weren't under one hundred percent time pressure because you were much more flexible. You could perhaps try to bring back topics. It's not like that digitally. Once it's done, it's out there.
18	Lara Cardoso Nunes 3:22 Yes, and above all, there are now many guidelines that you have to follow.
19	HBV 3:38 Exactly.
20	Lara Cardoso Nunes 3:42 One of the most popular ways to communicate online these days is social media.
21	What importance do you attach to social networks in terms of transparency? And do you see this in a critical or positive light?
22	HBV 3:47 So I think it's more positive from a company perspective. But for the many private individuals who are on social media, it is certainly a diffuse picture. Yes, a lot of things happen there that I don't think you would necessarily do in normal face-to-face communication, but which suddenly fit in there. And I'd say that's completely unthinkable in a company, where everything is so clean and checked. Things like

that won't happen there, but basically you have a completely different form of publicity and transparency than you used to have.

23 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 4:30

24 That's true, and you're also confronted with feedback much more often, which you have to respond to. Then I would also be interested to know what your opinion is on the influence of transparency levels on the perception of a company's reputation? Do you think this is a major influence or what do you think?

25 **HBV** 4:59

Yes, absolutely, so in the company I last worked for, and with the big scandal, which to some extent suffered from a lack of transparency or only became what it ultimately became as a result of lack of transparency. If the issue had been dealt more openly and publicly at a much earlier stage and all the facts, that were of course known at time X, had been disclosed, it would certainly have been much easier and the public would have gotten a much different picture. As it is, we have been given an image of a company that is, let's say, operating within rigid boundaries, where people tend to wall themselves in and that is obviously not the way to solve crises today.

26 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 5:54

In any case, they also believe that companies, for example, should publish their product information openly and honestly.

27 And whether this can also contribute to transparency warnings?

28 In the case of product information, I mean, for example, how sustainable the production of the cars was, how sustainable the supply chains are.

29 How do you feel about disclosing all this information?

30 **HBV** 6:28

So it's a veritable flood of information, which I think has to be broken down properly so that the consumer can understand it at all, if we look at the Supply Chain Tracing Act, then I don't think it's something you can even come close to explaining to anyone on social media, because it takes hours. But you have to pick out significant points and present them openly, if you don't do that, you'll end up on a drip somewhere and. The fact that many more people are now able to express their opinions publicly than was previously the case. Where the media had a very exposed position, it's different today, of course, and you're exposed to much greater influences, so if you don't communicate transparently today, I think you go under.

31 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 7:30

That's definitely true and I already mentioned sustainability briefly, when you talk about sustainability, corporate social responsibility often comes up, which is becoming increasingly important. And more and more companies are speaking out about it. How do you think the publication of reports on corporate social responsibility can contribute to the perceived transparency of a company?

32 **HBV** 7:59

So I say, I think the companies make an extreme effort to do this and they also have to make an extreme effort, because the reports are all certified, are approved and are subject to EU guidelines, global guidelines and so on and so forth.

33 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 8:16

Yes, for example, the GRI standards, etc.

34 **HBV** 8:28

Yes, exactly, so I think it contains everything a company can do, especially when you see how these departments have been staffed. In the last few years, the number of staff has really increased massively. You can see that companies have understood what they have to do there and that they have to communicate it properly.

35 Even if it's for the end consumer. I think especially here you always have to pick out things and try to communicate them. However, you're quickly subject to this greenwashing label, which is very dangerous, you have to be very careful and not just pick out great examples, which then automatically lead to a greenwashing sticker, although they are certainly not meant that way by the companies, but that's just the danger. In other words, the danger that you are subject to. You therefore have to stake out a reasonably broad, clean field and you can't try to sweep issues that exist everywhere in every company under the carpet, you have to solve them. And I believe that this solution alone, sharing it with the public, is, I think, part of the reason why the public still has doubts today as to whether companies are really completely transparent.

36 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 9:49

In the same way, don't just say this is our goal, but this is how we achieve it, because we are currently doing this and that. Am I right?

37 **HBV** 9:54

Yes, exactly showing the path, yes, and also step by step, i.e. pointing out paths on which you are traveling, where you have not yet reached the goal, as you rightly say, of course, but the path there is decisive and then of course you can also take a different path, so that there is a fork in the road. Where you say, well, we can't go

any further now, so you might have to review it again and think about another option. But only if you share this with the public will you gain the label of transparency.

38 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 10:32

How did the last company you worked for implement corporate social responsibility?

39 **HBV** 10:44

Well, I would say that supply chains have been around for a relatively long time in the automotive industry here and have been dealt with very, very intensively. I'd say that if you do this down to the last supplier and their supply chain, which you also have to examine today, it's a relatively complex undertaking. I've already said that these departments have had to increase their staffing because it's often manual work and they can't just fall back on any old tool; a lot of things have to be implemented first. Then it's not even a question of the manufacturer as such, since he has certainly denied this relatively quickly, well quickly in quotation marks and over a specific timeline. But the suppliers, in the third, fourth and fifth level, I'll say, that's where it gets more difficult and that's why you have to support them. Above all, because of course they can't give up these resources in terms of personnel, you have to support them in order to be able to go down this path together.

40 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 11:56

Good point. Thank you very much, I would like to ask a few final questions, and from your point of view, what are the positive effects of transparent digital corporate communication? We've already talked about this briefly.

41 It can have a positive or negative impact on reputation. But what other positive effects can you think of at the top of your head?

42 **HBV** 12:24

So the reputation is of course crucial, because ultimately it's about selling a product and then the way to get there has to be reinforced in such a way that the customer is really convinced. You can get information differently today than you could in the past. So I wanted to make that very clear again. When I started in the automotive industry 30 years ago, there were classic brochures and there was the local dealer and you trusted them. So the manufacturer didn't really play a role at all. Today, however, the manufacturer itself is moving into the role of direct marketer and, above all, I'd say it's directly involved in all the social channels, which is why the manufacturer has gained completely different information obligations and a completely different duty to inform customers, which wasn't the case in the past. That was and is all positive. Ultimately, I think that's what it's all about, or

ultimately it also shows that you deal openly with a wide range of topics, which you certainly didn't do in all forms in the past.

43 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:32

Yes, that has changed and definitely helps with the purchase decision.

44 **HBV** 13:38

Yes, that's what it's all about in the end, we can't fool ourselves, so all things, regardless of whether we're advertising cosmetics or cars or machines or whatever, in the end, person A wants to sell something to person B.

45 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 13:40

Yes, that's true. And what challenges do you currently see in digital corporate communication, particularly in terms of transparency, but also challenges in general?

46 **HBV** 14:12

Generally speaking, the whole thing requires a completely different level of topicality than was the case in the past. In the past, topics were prepared in the background, and of course they can still be prepared today. But topics that are virulent, that perhaps come from outside, you have to react to them very differently today. Much faster, much, much faster, so you just don't have any time at all. I used to work at Mercedes and we had the A-Class scandal there. Back then, it took almost four months for the company to come up with a solution. Today I'd say it's unthinkable, the issue would have been resolved in a week and the car would no longer be for sale. In this respect, you can see a decisive, completely different pressure. A positive pressure, but also a completely different reflection within the company. How do you deal with that? Yes, openness is ultimately the be-all and end-all. Openness and honesty.

47 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 15:21

That's right, these are or should definitely be the key factors for every company by now. And what trends do you see for the future of digital corporate communication? And especially in corporate communications in the automotive industry?

48 **HBV** 15:39

Well, I'll say AI is certainly a factor. I don't think everyone needs to make friends with it, but they definitely need to get to grips with it, because there's so much potential in it. I think that's fundamentally positive. But I think there's so much potential, but on the other hand, of course, there's also the risk that topics are simply

categorized incorrectly because, for example, someone has promptly set a keyword incorrectly and that leads to you having to react to it again.

49 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 15:55

Yes, it should definitely be treated with caution.

50 **HBV** 16:15

Yes, that requires extreme attention, it has to be said. All in all, we in the automotive industry have realized that this requires much, much more research, i.e. digital research, i.e. even more digital observation. So what happens in the many channels and I don't have to explain to you how diverse the channels are... if you try to control them worldwide, which is not possible anyway, but to examine them for keywords and so on, then you also need intelligent programs that pre-filter them and where there is a person somewhere who says what do we do with them now? And how do we deal with it, etc.? So that's a flood of data and information that larger companies can certainly write more easily than smaller companies because they simply have the personnel and resources. Not only internally, but also externally. Ultimately, however, it is a major challenge to carry out this research in order to extract the keys from it. Which topics are currently virulent? Or could become virulent? What do we have to face up to, where do we have to act? How must we position ourselves and so on. This happens within seconds today, whereas in the past you had days and weeks to prepare for something. So it's a much greater challenge in terms of topicality. Let's call it that.

51 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 17:40

Yes, that and perhaps also the attempt to continue to have a mix of traditional and modern communication approaches on one side, where you can act faster and also more thoughtfully on the other... I would personally perhaps still say that or not?

52 **HBV** 17:53

Yes, absolutely, and of course they have different hierarchies and different age structures in the companies, and of course they have to take everyone with them. They also have to communicate internally and the worker on the production line tends to be, let's say perhaps not so averse to all digital channels, so they also have to build bridges? I think it's also extremely important not to neglect this internal communication.

53 **Lara Cardoso Nunes** 18:24

Yes, that's right. So also that everything is integrated and knowledge is shared across departments.

54 **HBV** 18:25

55	Exactly.
56	Lara Cardoso Nunes 18:32
57	Okay, then I come to my final question, which is sometimes a bit of a challenge, so please take a quiet minute to think about how would you define transparency in the context of digital corporate communication?
58	HBV 18:49 Oh yes, yes, that's difficult.
59	Well, one definition is the issue of openness and honesty, which we've already mentioned several times. If we don't put this right at the top, then I don't think we'll be able to fill the concept of transparency with life.
60	If we impose restrictions, if we set limits on openness and honesty, then we will never create digital transparency.
61	Lara Cardoso Nunes 19:26 Okay, perfect, that fits! I will also take small pieces of the puzzle from all the definitions I receive and then put together my own definition. You have also mentioned two characteristics that are mentioned again and again, so thank you very much, I will now finish the recording.
62	HBV 19:31 Super.
63	You're welcome.

Appendix L: Detailed description of the interviewees

The first interview was conducted with SBB. He currently works for a German car manufacturer and focuses mainly on the management of campaigns on social media, where either the company or new vehicles are presented. The second interview was conducted with a Professor for Strategic Communication at the University of Hohenheim. The professor focuses in particular on topics such as data-driven communication. The interviewee is also a consultant for a German car manufacturer and has also worked for a German car manufacturer in the past. The third interview was conducted with Philipp Perwanger, he is a Director in the global consultancy agency “Brunswick Group”, which specializes in corporate communications. Here he is part of the automotive team and advises German automotive companies. Next, an interview was conducted with JRM. This interviewee has been working for a large German automotive company for many years, having held positions in various departments over the years. The focus has alternated between product strategy development and product communication. The fourth interview was conducted with the Director of Marketing at Audi in Portugal, with the code name ASA. In this position the responsibilities lay in strategy definition, corporate communication, and positioning in marketing. ASA has been working for German automotive companies for 20 years. This conversation was followed by an interview with Alexandra Landers. She is currently Global Head of Product Communication at the BMW Group. Mrs. Landers describes her department as the international competence center for all product-related press topics. The seventh interview was conducted with DSM, who works in the area of public relations for Mercedes-Benz in the Portuguese market. In this current position, the interviewee is responsible for everything the German brand does in Portugal. Then, the communications expert MSB was the eighth interviewee. The interviewee is currently in a top management role, overseeing the entirety of the marketing communications, corporate and board communications, and public affairs department. Before that, MSB worked for a German automobile manufacturer for several years and also headed the department for digital communication channels there. The final interviewee, HBV, currently works for Volkswagen Group as a communication consultant. HBV has also held high-ranking positions in communication departments at several other German automotive companies.

Appendix M: Digital flyer with recommendations

Implementing Transparency in Digital Communication of Automotive Companies

By implementing the following recommendations, automotive companies can improve their digital communication strategies with more transparency, thereby strengthening stakeholder relationships, building trust and maintaining a good corporate reputation.

Embracing Corporate Social Responsibility

Automotive companies need to do more than publish statements and reports on CSR. The key is to *present information creatively and make it easily accessible and understandable* online. Here it is important to *show tangible measures* and not just state broad goals in order to avoid accusations of greenwashing or pseudo-transparency. This also means *presenting concrete figures, data and facts* about what has been achieved and openly admitting when targets have not been met.

Effective Use of Digital Platforms



Clear Communication about Complex Topics

When communicating complex topics such as supply chains or technical details of vehicles, it is important to convey this information simply and precisely. This ensures that everyone can understand it and reduces the risk of misunderstandings.



Engagement and Responsiveness

Interactive communication strategies are essential to maintain open dialogue and address consumer needs effectively.



Targeted Approach

Not every automotive company needs to be on every platform. It should prioritize channels based on where their target audience is most active.

Artificial Intelligence in Corporate Communication

- AI is a significant trend offering many advantages that should be embraced.
- Companies need to stay informed about regulations and be transparent about their use of AI.

Internal Promotion of Transparency

- Transparency should be embedded in all company departments, influencing both internal and external communication.
- This can be achieved through sharing knowledge about products and strategies within the company.

Alignment with Corporate Identity

- Transparency should be an essential part of the strategy, vision, mission management style and ultimately the goal of automotive companies.
- Both behavior and communication need to align with this identity to be effective.



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