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How Corporate Brands Communicate their Higher Purpose on Social Media: Evidence from Top Global Brands on Twitter

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Abstract

Rising expectations in society for moral brand behavior have increased the relevance of brand purpose communication on social media. Nevertheless, there is a lack of fundamental research in this area. This study therefore examines brand purpose communication on Twitter, particularly with regard to the values addressed and the communication strategies implemented by corporate brands as well as the corresponding user engagement. A quantitative content analysis of 30 corporate Twitter accounts from 10 industries ($n = 6000$) shows that brand purpose is communicated across all brands and industries. The values of solidarity and sustainability are in the foreground. In an industry comparison, the FMCG industry and the financial services industry communicate most frequently on brand purpose issues, whereas the media industry and the luxury goods industry do so only marginally. Corporate brands predominantly use information strategy to communicate their brand purpose, although the involvement strategy leads to more engagement. Overall, the analysis shows that the potential of brand purpose communication is not being exploited to the same extent in all industries.

Keywords Brand purpose · Social media · Twitter · Human values · Two-way communication · Symmetrical communication · Response · Involvement · Engagement · Stakeholder theory

Introduction

The consequences of the climate crisis, the emergence of socio-political conflicts over equality and justice, the Covid-19 pandemic, and most recently the Ukraine war—all these developments show that the world is changing and with it society's view of brands. Whether it's Dove's longstanding "The Real Truth about Beauty" campaign to promote women's self-esteem and body awareness, Benetton's groundbreaking "Colors Campaign" on racism, AIDS, religious oppression and the death penalty, or the Patagonia owner's announcement that he would donate the company to a non-profit organization to combat global warming: More and more brands want to be recognized for making a meaningful contribution to the world.

Studies show that such attempts are necessary to meet consumers' increasing expectations of moral behavior: For example, two-thirds of consumers count themselves as "belief-driven buyers," meaning they buy based on conviction—not only their own, but also that of the company (Edelman 2018). The Meaningful Brands study by the Havas Group (2019) goes even further: According to this study, 77 percent of people would not even care if brands that do not address social, political, environmental, and cultural sensitivities were to disappear. The high pressure of expectations comes primarily from the younger generations, also known as Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2010) and Gen Y (born between 1980 and 1996), these generations are considered as more sensitive, critical, and at the same time more digitally and social media savvy than previous generations, such as Gen X or boomers (Shetty et al. 2019; Nguyen et al. 2022).

The resulting compulsion for companies to address moral issues has highlighted the relevance of the concept of a higher brand purpose. In contrast to goal-based brand purpose concepts, a brand's higher purpose is driven by human values and the self-conception of a brand as a social actor with moral responsibilities (George et al. 2021). With its higher purposes, a corporate brand

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declares what positive impact it wants to make in the world (Hsu 2017).

However, given that each brand faces a different set of stakeholders with distinct values and demands (Freeman 1984), there is likely to be no one-size-fits-all approach to developing and implementing a brand purpose, but specific challenges will lead to unique brand purpose approaches in different industries.

At the same time, the call for companies to show moral responsibility and ethical action requires intensive communication—ideally on the high-reach social media platforms that correspond to the target group of Gen Z and Gen Y, e.g. Twitter and Instagram. However, purpose communication via social networks also poses major challenges for brands, due to increasing participation opportunities for users. In this context, two main strategies, one-way and two-way communication, can be employed by companies. While the one-way communication (“information strategy”) focuses on the dissemination of facts, in two-way approaches (“involvement strategy”) open feedback from and dialogue with stakeholders are intended (Morsing 2006; Morsing and Schultz 2006; Rudeloff et al. 2022a).

Despite the increasing importance of the concept, brand purpose and in particular brand purpose communication in social media has hardly been investigated so far (von Ahn and Gauch 2021; Hajdas and Kłeczek 2021). Existing research focuses mainly on the potential benefits and challenges of a higher brand purpose from the perspective of the company, e.g. by conducting surveys or qualitative interviews with brand executives (von Ahn and Gauch 2021). However, the actual communication activities of corporate brands regarding their higher purpose with external stakeholders on social media has not been systematically assessed. Therefore, by applying the methodology of quantitative content analysis, the present work aims to contribute to closing this research gap. For this, the scope of brand purpose communication, the values communicated, and the communication strategies implemented as well as the user engagement are analyzed on social media across several brands and industries.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, basic characteristics of the brand purpose concept and its relevance across industries are introduced. Subsequently, the value typology of brand purpose communication, as well as brand purpose communication strategies in social media, are presented. The following sections cover the empirical investigation using the method of quantitative content analysis and the presentation of results. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the results including limitations and an outlook on potential future research.

Literature Review

Brand Purpose

Probably the best-known explanation of the brand purpose concept comes from Simon Sinek in his popular book *Start With Why* (2009). In this work, Sinek distinguishes the “why” (brand purpose), the “how” (resources, structures, processes) and the “what” (products and services), of successful brands (Sinek 2009). As markets become more saturated, people buy not what brands do, but why they do it, according to Sinek’s main thesis (Sinek 2009). A similarly well-known definition is presented by Spence and Rushing (2009), who describe brand purpose as the “reason for being”: “Purpose is a definite statement about the difference you are trying to make in the world. It’s your reason for being that goes beyond making money, and it almost always results in making more money than you ever thought possible” (p. 10).

Even more so than in Spence and Rushing (2009) and Sinek (2009), brand purpose today is conceptualized as a brand’s holistic perspective oriented toward the common good. New definitions have emerged accounting for this nuanced understanding of brand purpose. For example, Quinn and Thakor (2018) explicitly speak of a “higher purpose”, Kilian and Miklis (2019) of “higher corporate purpose”, and George et al. (2021) of “duty-based purpose.”

The guiding definition for this paper came from the concept of a higher brand purpose in George et al. (2021). The authors describe a firm’s higher purpose as “duty-based purpose”. In doing so, they distinguish their understanding of brand purpose (duty-based purpose perspective) from a “goal-based purpose perspective”. Following George et al. (2021) the “goal-based purpose perspective” is organization-specific, focuses primarily on the economic success of the company and crystallizes e.g. in mission statements, corporate visions, and strategic intents (Lovas and Ghoshal 2000). In contrast to this, a duty-based higher brand purpose is driven by human values, “the ideals, beliefs, and principles that guide the actions” (George et al. 2021, p. 4).

At the core of the concept of higher purpose lies the brand’s commitment to act morally and ethically and the intention to have a positive impact in the world. For instance, a firm’s social service, and environmental stewardship are expressions of its higher purpose. Therefore, overlaps between the communication of a brand’s higher purpose and the communication of CSR activities can be observed. However, the brand purpose concept goes beyond CSR, as further human values, beyond social and ecological responsibilities, can be embraced within a



higher purpose. For instance, a brand's striving for diversity may be a higher purpose but is usually not part of a company's CSR program (Hansen and Seierstad 2017).

Also, cause-related marketing as another similar approach can be distinguished from brand purpose as the former encompasses marketing activities primarily aimed at promoting products and services, while brand purpose, in contrast, as an overarching concept relates to the whole company and is therefore located on the corporate brand level (Brønn and Vrioni 2001; Hsu 2017). Furthermore, in contrast to brand activism, a brand's higher purpose does not necessarily embrace polarizing values (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

While prior research has intensively investigated in particular CSR communication (e. g. Du et al. 2010; Glauner 2019; Mayer 2018), as well as cause-related marketing (e. g. Brønn and Vrioni 2001) and recently also brand activism (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Herzberg and Rudeloff 2022), the holistic concept of a corporate brand's duty-based higher purpose and its communication in social media has not been examined comprehensively. Existing works on brand purpose discuss the concept partly on a theoretical (George et al. 2021; Williams et al. 2022) or conceptual level (Hsu 2017; Sinek 2009), while empirical studies focus for instance on brand purpose dimensions in specific sectors (Mirzaei et al. 2021), conduct case studies on individual brands (Hejdas and Kleczek 2021), examine the effects of purpose on financial performance (Gartenberg et al. 2019) or they analyze how brand purpose is managed within the company (von Ahnen and Gauch 2021). However, a quantitative study that considers how a brand's higher purpose is actually communicated to external stakeholders in social media across several brands and industries does not exist.

Brand Purpose Across Industries

As social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004) posits, individuals classify themselves into social groups based on characteristics such as gender, occupation, religion, or interests. Through this lens, engagement with a corporate brand's values can satisfy an individual's social need for identity formation by helping to validate one's own values, thereby supporting the definition of one's self (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Accordingly, by communicating their higher purpose, brands can address an individual's fundamental need (Hsu 2017; Yoganathan et al. 2018), potentially enhancing their reputation (Helm 2007).

The younger generations (Z and Y) increasingly claim to represent progressive values such as social and environmental sustainability or the protection of minorities. Thus, the relevance of brand purpose communication for companies to address these groups in a meaningful and successful way can be deduced.

At the same time, it can be assumed that a brand purpose and its communication are highly context-specific. This can be justified on the basis of the stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984). Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievements of the activities of an organization" (p. 46). As organizational activities impact stakeholders, stakeholders, in turn, demand that organizations behave in ways that reduce the negative impact of their activities on them or increase the positive impact (Lechler et al. 2020; Musavi and Musavi 2022).

In a similar vein, Beschorner and Hajduk (2017), drawing on Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu 1977; Rudeloff 2022), describe organizations as actors in specific organizational fields where concrete actions take place that are shaped by specific issues. While the stakeholder approach implies a core organization with surrounding stakeholders, this perspective assumes a network, in which an organization's identity is formed through its relationships with other actors.

From this point of view, brand purpose can be understood as a "legitimacy signal" that is consciously used by firms to demonstrate their orientation to other entities in the field (Jain et al. 2017, p. 701). This signal can either be a reaction to pressure from other actors, or it can be proactively issued by the firm (Sulkowski et al. 2018). In both cases, a specific stakeholder constellation can be expected to lead to corresponding corporate strategies.

Similarly, in the strategic brand management process, Keller describes the development of a brand identity and positioning along a brand's frame of reference. In addition to the competencies of the brand itself, the market in which a company operates is systematically considered. The decision as to whether a brand is positioned in the direction of a higher brand purpose and communicated accordingly is preceded by an analysis of the specific competition and target groups' needs and demands (Keller et al. 2011).

Thus, on the one hand, it can be assumed that positioning is brand-specific and emerges against the background of individual actor constellations. On the other hand, commonalities between brands within an industry are to be expected, as there are characteristic stakeholder interests that differ depending on the industry (Baumann-Pauly et al. 2017; Musavi and Musavi 2022). Accordingly, it can be expected that the relevance of brand purpose communication is at the same time brand- and industry-specific. In this context, the terms points-of-difference for brand-specific and points-of-parity for industry-specific positioning attributes have been coined (Keller et al. 2011; Keller and Richey 2006).

Regarding a brand's higher purpose, the question of how strongly certain stakeholder groups in an industry are able to exert pressure on corporate decisions is highly relevant. For example, it is possible that in certain industries the power of financial stakeholders is particularly strong, making it



more difficult to implement a higher purpose brand orientation in the company, as this may lead to lower profitability in the short term. This may be different in other industries, where the power of activist groups may be greater. At the same time, in other contexts, depending on the company and industry, it may be problematic to communicate brand purpose, as this may not be perceived as credible. Accordingly, Von Ahsen et al. (2021) have argued that the risk of negative effects of a higher brand purpose on financial success can vary greatly “depending on the industry in which the company operates and the nature of the purpose” (p. 200).

While there is still no systematic inventory of brand purpose communication across industries, studies on CSR activities have already shed light on industry-specific differences. For example, Dupire and Zali (2018) show that firms in industries with high competitive pressure focus their CSR activities more on “core stakeholders”—especially in B2C industries—than in other industries. At the same time, high competitive pressure leads firms in “dirty” industries to ignore environmental initiatives. Casado-Díaz et al. (2014) and Michelin et al. (2012) find that the performance effects and the risk of CSR announcements vary significantly depending on the industry to which the firm belongs. Brammer and Pavelin (2006) and Godfrey et al. (2010) show that the nature and level of CSR activities vary systematically across industries. Jain et al. (2017) identify four key factors for the influence of the industry on CSR activities: the degree of competitive dynamics, the nature of products and services, the extent of negative externalities and social activism, and the exposure to international markets.

Therefore, the following research question can be formulated:

RQ1: To what extent do corporate brands across different industries communicate their higher purpose on social media?

Value Typology of Brand Purpose Communication

In the context of corporate brand purpose as duty-based brand purpose (George et al. 2021), Hollensbe et al. (2014) have presented a typology of values, on which a higher brand purpose typically relies. This value typology is intended to systematize existing brand purpose concepts. The typology includes the values dignity, soly, plurality, subsidiarity, reciprocity, and sustainability, which will be shortly discussed in the following.

Dignity and *Subsidiarity* are the only two of the six values that are focused exclusively on employees. Dignity signifies that the morals and values of employees should be prioritized by companies (Ramarajan and Reid 2013). *Subsidiarity* emphasizes the value of employee voice and self-determination (Hollensbe et al. 2014). Corporate brands may signal dignity by improving working conditions along

the supply chain or acting against exploitation, forced labor, and child labor. Subsidiarity may be addressed by giving employees opportunities to co-determine decisions in the company as well as by expressing appreciation of the employees’ contributions to the company.

Solidarity refers to the general value of togetherness and expresses that others should be considered equally significant as oneself (Hollensbe et al. 2014). Acting in solidarity is the expression of mutual commitment, support, and helpfulness (Hollensbe et al. 2014). Companies can express their solidarity, for instance, in the form of fundraising for those in need.

Plurality emphasizes the importance of diversity in the world. In the context of the value of plurality, corporate brands may act on social group issues, including origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and disability.

Reciprocity encompasses the value of mutuality between organizations. The value of reciprocity is based on the expectation that doing business together, especially with charities and other public-good oriented institutions, creates benefits for all parties involved (Hollensbe et al. 2014). Corporate brands may e. g. signal reciprocity by cooperating with nonprofit organizations.

Ecological sustainability emerges from the concept of sustainability, building on the three dimensions of economic, environmental, and social sustainability. This value is based on the assumption that the protection of nature is the existential prerequisite of life on earth and thus of all goals. Issues such as climate and resource protection, avoiding waste of packaging, recycling, and product longevity all fit within the value of ecological sustainability.

Against the background of the theoretical considerations on the context dependency of brand purpose, it can be assumed that the values represented in brand purpose communication vary across industries, as specific stakeholder constellations determine the relevance of certain values. While the represented values of brand purpose communication in social media have not yet been investigated across industries, previous research has examined the interplay between industry-related factors and the thematic orientation of a company’s CSR activities (Casado-Díaz et al. 2014). For example, Jones (1999) finds that primary industries are mainly concerned with environmental issues; secondary industries are primarily concerned with employees, suppliers, customers, the environment, and communities; and service industries are primarily concerned with employees and consumers. On the other hand, Godfrey et al. (2010) show that consumer service industries focus on community involvement, while B-to-B industries focus their CSR activities on the natural environment. Martinuzzi et al. (2010) conclude that CSR issues are highly industry-specific, even sub-industry-specific.

Thus, the following research question can be formulated:



RQ2: What values do corporate brands across different industries represent when communicating their higher purpose on social media?

Communication Strategies

Following Morsing and Schultz (2006), three stakeholder relationship strategies can be distinguished: information strategy, response strategy, and involvement strategy. Given their value-oriented focus, those can be adapted also in the context of corporate brand purpose communication.

The *information strategy* is a source-oriented, informational approach. It is a one-way communication strategy, limited to disseminating factual information to the public. In this communication process, stakeholders are in a passive role (Morsing and Schultz 2006). Corporate brands use this strategy in the social media context especially to publish news, e.g., about company, product, or service developments or CSR initiatives. Stakeholder feedback is not expected (Rudeloff et al. 2022a, b).

The *response strategy*, on the other hand, is based on a two-way, asymmetric communication model (Morsing and Schultz 2006). Interaction with stakeholders takes place with the aim of increasing stakeholders' perceptions of the brand and generating public support (Morsing and Schultz 2006). Nonetheless, communication in this strategy still emanates primarily from the company. The response strategy is typically used by corporate brands as part of their social media activities to communicate advertising content, which can also include dialogue elements such as sweepstakes (Rudeloff et al. 2022a, b).

The stakeholder *involvement strategy* is the most complex communication strategy, as it is based on symmetrical two-way communication between the corporate brand and its stakeholders. The application of the strategy is intended to create a continuous, personal exchange with stakeholders and to achieve mutual understanding, agreement, or consent (Morsing and Schultz 2006). The focus is on the will to develop a beneficial and trusting relationship on an equal footing (Pearson 2017).

A simplified version of the communication strategies according to Morsing and Schultz (2006) has been proposed by Morsing (2006). She suggests summarizing the three strategies into two strategies: one-way and two-way strategies (Morsing 2006). As in Morsing and Schultz (2006), the information strategy is to be understood as one-way communication with a focus on the dissemination of factual information, in which generally no feedback is expected from the public. The involvement strategy combines the two-way communication strategies of response and involvement (Morsing 2006; Morsing and Schultz 2006).

Studies on the implementation of the communication strategies in social media come to inconsistent results

(e.g., Kim and Ferguson 2016; Cho et al. 2017; Yeonsoo 2019; Kucukusta et al. 2019). For example, Cho et al. (2017) find that companies more often use the information strategy than the involvement strategy in communicating their CSR activities via social media.

Given the assumption of industry-specific factors that influence a brand's positioning toward a higher purpose and the values it represents, it is expected that the corresponding communication strategies may also differ across industries. For example, O'Connor and Shumate (2010) and Dabic et al. (2016) have argued that firms in the same industry may use similar CSR communication to influence similar stakeholders. Empirical studies so far have focused on the differences between controversial and non-controversial industries. For example, Song and Wen (2020) found that controversial and non-controversial industries tend to use different strategies in their online CSR communication. Specifically, Vollero et al. (2019) found that firms in controversial industries were more likely to adopt CSR information strategies than firms in non-controversial industries.

Thus, the following research question can be formulated:

RQ3: What strategies do corporate brands across industries implement to communicate their higher purpose on social media?

Social media platforms function as internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010) and facilitate open dialogues between corporations and their stakeholders (Wirtz and Zimbres 2018; Kwon and Sung 2011; Macnamara and Zerfass 2012). In this context, social media engagement can be broadly defined as the result of interactive experiences stakeholders have with brands, products, or services via social media (Brodie et al. 2011).

Regarding the success of different communication approaches, it can be expected that two-way approaches are more successful than one-way approaches. Following ten generic principles derived from the Excellence Study (Grunig and Dozier 2003), which has been conducted across several industries, organizations should use "two-way symmetrical" communication in order "to contribute to organizational effectiveness by incorporating stakeholders' goals into an organization's" (Hung-Baesecke et al. 2021, p. 315). Accordingly Morsing and Schultz (2006) have emphasized that in general "external stakeholders may more strongly support and contribute to corporate CSR efforts if they engage in progressive iterations of sensemaking and sensegiving processes as this enhances awareness of mutual expectations" (p. 324). Given the rise of the co-creation paradigm in brand management, which increasingly recognizes the importance of interactions between a corporate brand and its stakeholders, it can be expected that these considerations will not be limited to a CSR context but also apply to



the broader concept of a brand's higher purpose (Iglesias and Ind 2020).

Furthermore, based on previous studies, the success of two-way communication can be expected, especially with regard to a brand's purpose communication in social media networks. (Rudeloff et al. 2022a, b; Wang and Yang 2020; Watkins 2017; Wen and Song 2017). Social media networks are used more extensively and actively by the younger generations (Gen Z and Gen Y) (Wallace et al. 2022; Shetty et al. 2019; Nguyen et al. 2022). They have a greater need to engage with the companies they do business with compared to previous generations (Wallace et al. 2022). Furthermore, brands primarily reach their existing followers by posting from their accounts. It can be assumed that these followers have a certain level of identification with the brand (Rudeloff and Damms 2022). At the same time, identification with a corporate brand positively influences social media engagement with this brand (Tuškej and Podnar 2018).

Thus, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

H1: A corporate brand's communication of a higher purpose on Twitter using the involvement strategy generates more social media engagement than a corporate brand's communication of a higher purpose using the information strategy.

Methods

Sample Selection

A quantitative content analysis was conducted to answer the research questions and test the hypothesis. The sample selection was based on the Best Global Brands ranking, which is published annually by the brand consultancy Interbrand. The Best Global Brands ranking annually lists the 100 most valuable global brands. Interbrand's brand evaluation procedure is based on financial and marketing data (Interbrand 2021).

Various brands were selected from the Best Global Brand Report 2021 for the empirical study. In order to create a balanced mix of industries, the top three brands per industry were included. The tweets (excluding images and videos) of these brands on the social media network Twitter form the units of analysis. Specifically, the last 200 Twitter posts per brand were selected. Before determining the exact sample, a screening of the corporate brand accounts on Twitter was conducted. The screening was based on the brands' official corporate accounts on Twitter. In cases where there were multiple corporate accounts, the one that could be identified as the brand's official corporate Twitter account was selected. In addition, we assessed which corporate brand accounts were actively and regularly communicating via Twitter. Accounts based only on retweets and replies were excluded. In some cases, where the regularity and minimum

of 200 Twitter posts could not be guaranteed, the brand was excluded and the next top brand in the industry ranking was included. A few industries even had to be excluded entirely due to the irregularity of brand tweets.

As a result, this selection process led to 30 corporate brands (200 tweets each) in 10 industries. This resulted in a sample of $n = 6000$. Thus, the research analyzed a variety of industries from the Global Brand Report 2021, including alcohol (Budweiser, Corona, Jack Daniels), automotive (Toyota, Audi, Tesla), business-related services (Cisco, SAP, Accenture), electronics (Sony, Canon, Panasonic), financial services (JP Morgan, American Express, Allianz), FMCG (Johnson & Johnson, L'Oréal Paris, Gillette), luxury (Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Hermès Paris), media (YouTube, Instagram, Disney), retail (IKEA, H&M, Ebay) and technology (Amazon, Microsoft, Intel).

Coding Procedure

The coding procedure was implemented based on Rössler (2017). Based on the theoretical background of the study, a codebook was developed. The codebook consisted of category definitions, using rules for distinguishing different categories with the help of anchor examples. For the coding of the material and subsequent descriptive and inferential statistics, the program IBM SPSS Statistics (version 28) was used.

The codebook included the formal categories: Brand name, industry, and date, as well as the social media engagement. To measure the engagement, retweets and likes for each tweet were coded, which according to Dolan et al. (2015) are considered moderate, positively valued engagement indicators. Retweets and likes contribute to deepening customer relationships and can increase the reach of brands (Murdough 2009), and because of this, they are often used to examine engagement with brand messages (Vargo 2016).

On Twitter, followers can show engagement by liking or retweeting a message from a brand. While liking expresses approval of a tweet, retweeting means the (public) forwarding of a previously published message to one's followers. Through this sharing feature, other users who follow the person who just retweeted can see that tweet in their timelines. When this interaction occurs for a brand, its organic reach grows. The main difference between a retweet and a like is the intended sharing function that comes with retweeting (Kim 2020; Murdough 2009).

Content categories included: Brand purpose communication (whether a post included a higher brand purpose), brand purpose values (which brand purpose values were addressed), and communication strategy (which communication strategy was implemented). With respect to the content categories, the presence or absence of brand purpose communication in a post was first indicated via two nominal



categories. We followed the definition of a duty-based higher brand purpose of George et al. (2021) to evaluate if a post could be coded as brand purpose communication. This was central to the analysis because only if a brand's post could be classified as referring to a higher purpose (RQ1) could the brand purpose values (RQ2) and the communication strategy (RQ3) be subsequently coded along multiple dimensions. We categorized the brand purpose values based on Hollensbe et al. (2014). The communication strategies, information, and involvement were measured according to Morsing (2006) and Rudeloff et al. (2022a).

To test the reliability of the measurement, the intracoder reliability test was used to determine Krippendorff's alpha (Rössler 2017) for the content categories. For a representative test of intracoder reliability, the first 20 tweets per brand were determined with two coders, i.e., a total of 600 brand tweets. All three reliability coefficients of the content categories were above the threshold of 0.80 (RQ1, brand purpose: $\alpha = 0.9475$; RQ2, values = $\alpha = 0.8823$; RQ3, communication strategies: $\alpha = 0.8397$). Accordingly, intracoder reliability was satisfactory.

Results

RQ1 assessed the extent of brand purpose communication on Twitter. The analysis was based on a total of $n = 6000$ Twitter posts (200 posts per corporate brand) from the Best Global Brands ranking 2021. The results show that brand purpose posts account for about one third of the examined tweets. Of the $n = 6000$ Twitter posts, a brand purpose reference was identified in 1,860 (31.0%) tweets, while none was identified in 4,140 (69.0%) posts.

Descriptive data analyses revealed that corporate brands within the FMCG industry (316; 52.7%) communicate most frequently on the topic of brand purpose, followed by the business services industry (284; 47.3%) and the financial services industry (279; 46.5%). The alcohol industry (97; 16.2%) and the luxury goods industry (70; 11.7%) communicate the least on brand purpose topics.

In a brand comparison, the Johnson & Johnson brand in the FMCG sector (162; 81%) shows the most brand purpose communication, followed by the brands Allianz (financial services) (131; 65.5%), L'Oréal (FMCG) (125; 62.5%) and Cisco (technology) (125; 62.5%). Luxury brands, including Chanel (10; 5.0%) and Louis Vuitton (22; 11.0%), and media brand Disney, (24; 12.0%) communicate the least on brand purpose topics.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of brand purpose communication in industry comparison.

RQ2 refers to the analysis of brand purpose values. There are a total of 1,860 (31.0%) brand purpose tweets. Of these, 584 (31.4%) relate to the value of solidarity, which was the

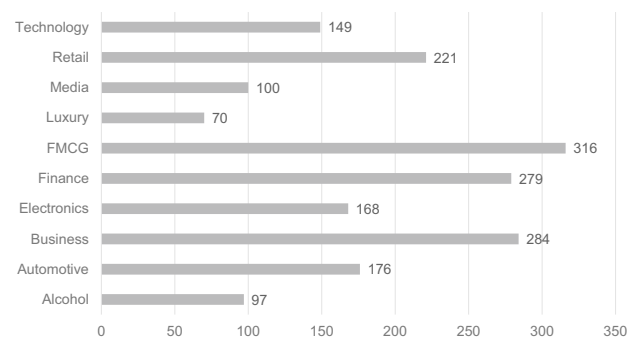


Fig. 1 Distribution of brand purpose communication, industry comparison (number of tweets). $n = 1,860$

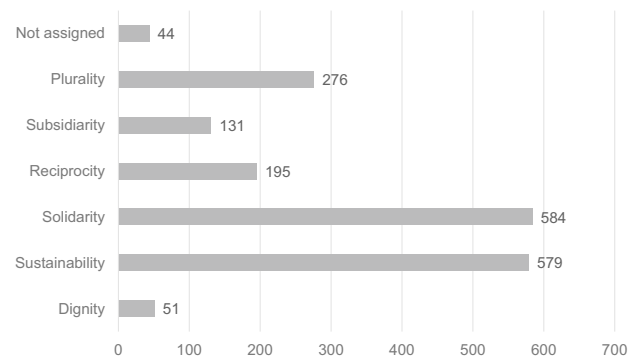


Fig. 2 Distribution of brand purpose values (number of tweets). $n = 1,860$

most frequently represented. Sustainability was the second most frequently represented (579 tweets; 31.1%), followed by plurality (276 tweets; 14.8%), reciprocity (195 tweets; 10.5%), subsidiarity (131 tweets; 7%), and dignity (51 tweets; 2.7%).

Furthermore, the results show that solidarity is most prevalent in the financial services industry (133; 39.8%), the consumer goods industry, the technology industry, and the luxury goods industry. Sustainability, the second most frequently used value in the industry picture, is used most frequently by the automotive industry, alcohol industry, retail industry, electronics industry, and business-related services industry. Plurality is used most frequently by the media industry (57 tweets; 57.0%).

Figure 2 shows the frequencies of the values used by corporate brands for brand purpose communication.

With regard to RQ3, a dominance of the use of information strategy over involvement strategy can be ascertained. Thus, information strategy is used in 1,030 brand purpose tweets (55.38%) by brands, whereas involvement strategy was only used in 830 brand purpose tweets (44.62%). In particular, the technology (75.8%), the electronics (74.4%), the luxury (74.3%), the finance (73.5%) and the FMCG (70.6%)



industry employ predominantly the information strategy in communicating their higher brand purpose, while only the automotive (86.4%) and the business services industry (78.5%) use the involvement strategy to a relatively high degree.

A detailed overview of distribution of higher purpose tweets, the values and communication strategies across industries can be found in Table 1.

To assess H1, t-tests were conducted. The data analysis revealed an insignificant difference ($t_{\text{Welch}}(1425.888) = -1.390$, $p > 0.165$) in the average likes of information strategy brand purpose posts ($M = 643.616$; $SD = 4253.082$) compared to involvement strategy posts ($M = 992.129$; $SD = 6132.944$). The t-tests also showed an insignificant difference ($t_{\text{Welch}}(1309.873) = -1.643$, $p > 0.101$) between the average retweets when using information strategy ($M = 70.629$; $SD = 412.600$) in comparison to involvement strategy ($M = 114.528$; $SD = 674.961$). Consequently, involvement strategy generates more likes and retweets than information strategy. However, as the p-values are above the significance level of 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), H1 cannot be confirmed.

Discussion

Scope of Brand Purpose Communication

The concept of brand purpose plays a significant role in the communication of corporate brands on Twitter. This has been indicated by the literature (e.g. Von Ahn et al. 2021) and can be now confirmed by the empirical results of this study. The overall result shows that around one third of the Twitter posts examined had a brand purpose reference.

With regard to brands and industries, clear differences can be identified in terms of the scope of brand purpose communication. First of all, it can be emphasized that brand purpose communication on Twitter is addressed across all brands and industries, albeit to varying degrees. A comparison of industries shows that the largest share of brand purpose communication falls on the FMCG industry, the business-related services industry, and the financial services industry. These findings partly confirm the results of prior studies in the field of CSR Communication who have highlighted, that industries with high levels of public contact, such as retailing, banking, and insurance, create a greater need for positive image and thus disclose more CSR information than low contact industries (Dabic et al. 2016). However, while the business services industry has been shown in our sample to communicate intensively on brand purpose, Dabic et al. (2016) have reported that B-to-B industries report less CSR information than B-to-C industries.

Table 1 Frequency analysis of brand purpose communication by industry

Category <i>Brand</i>	Brand Purpose		Brand Purpose Values						Communication Strategies		
	Yes	No	Dignity	Solidarity	Plurality	Subsidiarity	Reciprocity	Sustaina- bility	Not assigned	Information	Involvement
Alcohol	97 (16.2%)	503 (83.8%)	0 (0.0%)	15 (15.5%)	17 (17.5%)	4 (4.1%)	6 (6.2%)	55 (56.7%)	0 (0.0%)	42 (43.3%)	55 (56.7%)
	176 (29.3%)	424 (70.7%)	0 (0.0%)	65 (36.9%)	4 (2.3%)	24 (13.6%)	4 (2.3%)	79 (44.9%)	0 (0.0%)	24 (13.6%)	152 (86.4%)
Automotive	284 (47.3%)	316 (52.7%)	31 (11.0%)	60 (21.1%)	35 (12.3%)	41 (14.4%)	36 (12.7%)	81 (28.5%)	0 (0.0%)	61 (21.5%)	223 (78.5%)
Business	168 (28.0%)	432 (72.0%)	2 (1.2%)	41 (24.4%)	10 (6.0%)	8 (4.8%)	44 (26.2%)	55 (32.7%)	8 (4.8%)	125 (74.4%)	42 (25.0%)
Electronics	279 (46.5%)	321 (53.5%)	5 (1.8%)	111 (39.8%)	33 (11.8%)	31 (11.1%)	34 (12.2%)	51 (18.3%)	15 (5.4%)	205 (73.5%)	74 (26.5%)
Finance	316 (52.7%)	284 (47.3%)	2 (0.6%)	133 (42.1%)	59 (18.7%)	8 (2.6%)	26 (8.2%)	77 (24.4%)	11 (3.5%)	223 (70.6%)	93 (29.4%)
FMCG	70 (11.7%)	530 (88.3%)	0 (0.0%)	38 (54.3%)	15 (21.4%)	1 (1.4%)	7 (10.0%)	9 (12.9%)	0 (0.0%)	52 (74.3%)	18 (25.7%)
Luxury	100 (16.7%)	500 (83.3%)	0 (0.0%)	24 (24.0%)	57 (57.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.0%)	15 (15.0%)	2 (3.0%)	61 (61.0%)	39 (39.0%)
Media	221 (36.8%)	379 (63.2%)	2 (0.9%)	36 (16.3%)	30 (13.6%)	2 (0.9%)	25 (11.3%)	123 (55.7%)	3 (1.4%)	121 (54.8%)	100 (45.2%)
Retail	149 (24.8%)	451 (75.2%)	9 (6.0%)	61 (41.0%)	16 (10.7%)	12 (8.1%)	11 (7.4%)	34 (22.8%)	5 (3.4%)	113 (75.8%)	36 (24.2%)
Technology											

$n = 6000$



For corporate brands in the FMCG sector, the majority of tweets, namely 52.7%, relate to brand purpose issues. Jain et al. (2017) have identified the degree of competitive dynamics as a key factor in the industry's influence on CSR activities. The FMCG sector is a particularly saturated industry. Purchasing decisions in the FMCG sector are typically made with a low involvement of consumers. FMCG companies are generally perceived as increasingly homogeneous and largely interchangeable. In addition, consumers' perceptions of risk in consumer goods markets is relatively low given the low prices, low complexity, and high standardization in those markets (Dwivedi and McDonald 2018). This consequently forces FMCG brands to make greater efforts to achieve customer loyalty and differentiation from competitors, as a differentiation strategy based on functional benefits is more difficult than in other industries. Corporate brands in the FMCG industry can therefore implement brand purpose concepts and by this focus on human values to differentiate themselves. Accordingly, the Purpose Readiness Study (Globeone 2021) shows that the FMCG industry is in a good position to successfully communicate purpose to employees, consumers, and the wider public (Globeone 2021).

In addition to the FMCG sector, an above-average proportion of brand purpose communication was also identified in the financial services sector (46.5%). A possible reason, besides the high level of direct contact with the public, for this result is that the financial services industry is perceived by consumers as an abstract, highly regulated, and largely fact-oriented sector. Jain et al. (2017) have identified the nature of products and services as one factor explaining the influence of the industry on CSR activities. Products and services in this industry tend to be complex and difficult to explain, which is why there is a presumed lack of interest and information on the demand side (Bravo et al. 2012). In this context, brand purpose can potentially play a role in relieving and evoking positive emotions with the brand. Thus, the use of brand purpose communication may offer finance brands the opportunity to move away from a core product that is difficult to explain and instead communicate about values that are more accessible to the public. This is consistent with Hsu's (2017) assumption that emotional brand purpose messages are more memorable and provide emotional relief by detaching from functional product benefits.

Furthermore, the importance of brand purpose communication for the FMCG and the financial sector may stem from the increasing power of industry-specific activist stakeholders. For example, in the FMCG sector the NGO Foodwatch, founded in Germany in 2002, has successfully used social media communication to inform consumers about problematic practices in the food industry (Schneider et al. 2019). This practice has been described

as "governance by campaign" (Schneider et al. 2019, p. 172). On the other hand, in the financial sector the Global Alliance for Banking on Values represents a growing number of "social banks" (Weber 2014, p. 265). Social banks are financial institutions that prioritize social, environmental, and sustainability benefits in their operations. Unlike conventional banks, they integrate sustainability into their core culture and strategy rather than treating it as an optional add-on to profit-driven objectives. One example is the Swiss Alternative Bank, which explicitly focuses on investing in and financing sustainable projects and businesses, rather than solely pursuing maximum profits (Weber 2014).

It is striking that, as in the media industry and the alcohol industry, brand purpose communication is also found only marginally in the luxury goods industry. According to Dubois et al. (2001), luxury products are characterized by six key features, including non-necessity, tradition, aesthetics, exclusivity, high price, and excellent product quality. These characteristics are diametrically opposed to the duty-based brand purpose idea of prioritizing the common good. It can be assumed that buyers of luxury brands are less interested in the communicated purpose, but rather in the prestige of the brand. This assumption is in line with Davies et al. (2012), who conclude that sustainability and ethics are less important to consumers in the purchase decision process for luxury goods than for everyday consumer goods. Accordingly, Pinto et al. (2019) state that consumers may negatively evaluate luxury brands that engage in CSR because they do not perceive a consistency between luxury and ethical consumption.

In a similar vein, other researchers have described the conflicting values in the luxury industry as the CSR-luxury paradox (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau 2014; Wong and Danesh 2017). For example, the concept of social distinction as a core benefit of luxury brands contradicts the notion of equality, a core value of CSR and the higher purpose of a brand. While Wong and Danesh (2017) analyzed in their qualitative study that luxury brands use two discursive strategies to manage this CSR-luxury paradox (harmonious coexistence and convergence of paradoxes), this study shows that overall luxury brands tend to avoid potential tensions by incorporating brand purpose messages in their social media communications to a lesser extent than other industries.

Furthermore, it is conceivable that in the luxury industry the power of financial stakeholders is particularly strong, making it more difficult to implement a higher purpose brand orientation in the company, as this may lead to lower profitability in the short term. Accordingly, Duma et al. (2022) highlight the dominance of shareholder-oriented business practices; they conclude that "corporate purpose is both conceptually underdeveloped and practically underutilized" (p. 214) in the luxury industry.



In addition, it is reasonable to assume that the younger generations are not yet considered core stakeholders in the luxury industry. This is especially true for Generation Z, most of whose members do not have sufficient purchasing power because they have not yet entered the labor market (Munsch 2021). In other words: Luxury brands are not (yet) dependent on highly critical customers for their current business performance.

As suggested by previous studies, luxury brands are perceived as more unique and less interchangeable than brands from other sectors (Ko et al. 2019). Consumers tend to identify and form strong relationships with luxury brands (Pinto et al. 2019). On this basis, it can be assumed that the pressure from external stakeholders to position the brand towards a higher purpose in order to differentiate it from competitors is comparatively low for luxury brands. Paradoxically, this situation offers at the same time great potential for further developing brand uniqueness through brand purpose.

Our empirical analysis examined the luxury brands Louis Vuitton, Chanel and Hermès Paris, and thus exclusively fashion brands. Brand purpose communication was used sporadically, mostly independent of the fashion product (e.g. in regard to the value of plurality). Thus, it can be concluded that brand purpose communication in the luxury goods segment has not yet been exhausted and that luxury brands such as Chanel (1; 5%) and Louis Vuitton (22; 11%)—which display the lowest proportion of brand purpose communication in industry comparison—must adapt to the increasing call for values, which brands such as Gucci (2022) have recently been doing, in order to meet the expectations of younger generations. This is relevant as luxury brands in particular hold an important orientation and identification function and symbolize cultural ideals.

Values of Brand Purpose Communication

In addition to the scope of brand purpose communication, the brand purpose values represented were examined. The empirical results show that the value of solidarity dominates across all sectors, especially in the FMCG and financial services sectors. Corporate brands in this sector communicated primarily about their own philanthropic efforts (e.g., sponsorship, donations, fundraising, etc.) and their adoption of social engagement. For example, tweets from the industry show SAP highlighting its scholarship offered to refugees and displaced persons, and Cisco highlighting its support of National Volunteer Week. It is remarkable that, in addition to philanthropy, the corporate brands also integrate current developments and issues, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the mental health crisis, and, in some cases, the Ukraine war, into their brand purpose communications. The pandemic in particular is addressed frequently across all sectors and

brands in our sample. In the course of the pandemic and since the start of the Ukraine war, purpose-driven communication has possibly become even more important for corporate brands on social media in order to engage consumers.

Although the value plurality is only used more frequently by the media industry (57%), it is nevertheless present in communications across all brands and industries. The debate about diversity and equality thus appears to be not only of great political interest, but also relevant for corporate brand purpose communication. The brands we studied primarily address issues in the areas of female empowerment, the LGBTQ community, equality, and minority communities (Blacks, Hispanics, Latinos).

Prior studies on CSR have shown that B-to-B-industries prioritize environmental issues in their communication. This can be confirmed with our data, as the business services industry communicates on the value of sustainability (28.5%) to a higher degree than on other values such as solidarity (21.1%) and subsidiarity (14.4%).

Strategies and Engagement of Brand Purpose Communication

Finally, only the automotive and the business industries employ the involvement strategy intensively. Also, the alcohol industry uses involvement communication (56.7%) more frequently than the information strategy (43.3%). This is surprising, as prior studies have suggested that controversial industries rely predominantly on information strategies, which is also theoretically plausible given the risk of negative feedbacks (Vollero et al. 2019). However, it could also be shown with our data that the alcohol industry is communicating less on brand purpose than most other sectors.

Overall, the results indicate that corporate brands communicate their purpose predominantly with an information strategy. This is remarkable, as our data also shows that brand purpose communication via involvement strategies creates on average more likes and retweets than the information strategy, although the results of the t-tests were not significant. These findings are overall in line with other studies demonstrating that two-way communication is associated with a better communication performance, such as higher social media engagement (Pakura and Rudeloff 2020; Pakura et al. 2020; Wen and Song 2017).

However, it can be assumed that corporate brands must be perceived as authentic and credible in order to generate positive engagement. This is a major challenge for communication managers as consumers may increasingly suspect brands of “purpose washing” (Findlay and Moran 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020). While social media provides brands with opportunities to interact with their stakeholders, at the same time they are increasingly losing control



due to an increase in user-generated content and online consumer activism (Macnamara and Zerfass 2012). Since brand purpose communication deals with sensitive issues related to human values, this can potentially have a great impact on brands' reputation. Corporate brands that openly and participatively engage with stakeholders on social media about brand purpose issues as part of a two-way involvement communication strategy may create space for criticism and run the risk of attracting critical stakeholders who publicly question their legitimacy. It seems plausible to assume that the relatively low proportion of two-way communication, as well as of brand purpose communication in general in some industries (e.g., luxury goods, alcohol, media), may be attributed to this perceived risk.

Limitations and Future Research

The research focus of this study was to analyze the status quo of corporate brand purpose communication on Twitter. The first limitation refers to the sample selection and size. The low representativeness of the study—especially within the individual industries—can be seen as a limitation. A larger selection of brands per industry and a longer study period and/or a larger number of Twitter posts as units of analysis would have made it possible to draw more reliable conclusions about the status quo of brand purpose communication.

Furthermore, images and videos were excluded. These media in particular create interactivity and entertainment value. In future research on the topic of brand purpose communication, these media should be included and, for example, the extent to which these interactive media create additional interaction or engagement should be investigated.

The analysis of communication strategies is based only on data from Twitter, but not on other social media networks such as Instagram and LinkedIn. In this context, it would be worthwhile for future research to also consider the role of different types of social media networks in brand purpose communication, as well as the development of corresponding communication strategies. Twitter, as a micro-blogging platform, differs from other social media networks, thus extending the research to other channels would be interesting.

This is especially true since Twitter was recently bought by entrepreneur Elon Musk, which has led to massive cuts to its content moderation teams, an increase in hate speech, and the firing of Twitter's Ethics in AI team (Kwet 2023; Knight 2022). In addition, Musk has introduced a new paid membership option, which is suspected to make it easier for fake accounts to operate on the platform.

In this context, a public discussion about the ethics of Twitter's new corporate governance has emerged. Numerous users and brands have since left the platform or limited

their activities. For example, the pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly withdrew its advertising from Twitter after being attacked by a fake account (Picchi 2022).

This study was conducted before Musk acquired Twitter. It can be assumed that the communication of brand purpose on the "new" Twitter has changed, that brands post less or act more defensively, e.g. engage in less involvement communication, because they have to fear hate speech to a greater extent. This is particularly conceivable with respect to values that are potentially more polarizing, such as plurality and diversity. This possible shift should be investigated in further studies, for example with comparative quantitative content analyses or qualitative interviews with brand managers.

Finally, it should be noted that this study has analyzed the impact of corporate brand purpose communication on consumer perceptions by examining social media engagement in terms of likes and retweets on Twitter. Future studies could incorporate further variables to measure consumer perceptions, e.g. by conducting sentiment analysis of users' comments and online discussions regarding brands' higher purposes.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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