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Summary of the dissertation

**Communication as a profiling vector for establishing marketing strategies
in the B2B care sector**

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Table of contents

- List of abbreviations..... 6**
- List of illustrations 8**
- List of tables..... 9**

- Acknowledgements..... 11**

- 1. Introduction..... 12**
 - 1.1 Initial situation and problem definition 12
 - 1.2 Research questions..... 15
 - 1.3 Objectives and structure of the dissertation 16

- 2. Theoretical frame of reference 18**
 - 2.1 Search strategy 19
 - 2.2 Description of the state of research..... 20
 - 2.2.1 Business to Business (B2B)..... 20
 - 2.2.2 Digital marketing 22
 - 2.2.2.1 General aspects of communication 22
 - 2.2.2.2 Digitalisation and improvement of communication 25
 - 2.2.2.3 Stakeholder approach..... 26
 - 2.2.2.4 Digital communication and social media in marketing 28
 - 2.2.2.5 Technology Acceptance Model 30
 - 2.2.2.6 SMEs and branding in marketing communication 33
 - 2.2.2.7 Corporate social responsibility 34
 - 2.2.3 Strategic marketing 37
 - 2.2.3.1 Strategic marketing in B2B 37
 - 2.2.3.2 Communication and marketing: CEO function 38
 - 2.2.3.3 Brand management in B2B..... 40
 - 2.2.3.4 Social media as a means of communication in B2B..... 41
 - 2.3 Research gap and design of the research model 43

3.	Theoretical foundation	50
3.1	Digitalisation of communication in the social economy	50
3.1.1	ICT technology as a driver of change	50
3.1.2	Areas of tension in the social economy due to ICT technologies.....	52
3.1.3	Network - stakeholder groups of a social economy organisation	55
3.2	Digital transformation of business models	60
3.2.1	Basic logic of business models	60
3.2.2	Innovations in the social economy B2B context	61
3.2.3	Megatrends as drivers for innovative business models	64
3.2.4	Organisational framework conditions put to the test.....	67
3.3	Fundamentals of strategy development	68
3.3.1	Typologisation of strategies.....	68
3.3.2	Necessity of strategy development	69
3.3.3	Critical resources of a social economy organisation	71
3.3.4	Development of a strategy model for (marketing) communication in the B2B context	73
3.4	Communication policy in marketing	76
3.4.1	Conceptual delimitation and definition	76
3.4.2	Goals and functions	77
3.4.3	Communication strategies	79
3.5	Communication strategies in the B2B social economy	83
3.5.1	Conceptual delimitation and definition	83
3.5.2	Special features of socio B2B marketing.....	83
3.5.3	Implementation options	85
3.5.2.1	Target group analysis.....	85
3.5.2.2	Strategy selection.....	86
3.5.3.3	Use of instruments	88
3.5.3.3.1	Personal communication.....	88
3.5.3.3.2	Sponsoring	89
3.5.3.3.3	Social media communication.....	90
3.6	Pandemics as a catalyst for organisational profiling	91
3.6.1	Figures, data and facts about the coronavirus pandemic	92
3.6.2	Effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the EU economy	93
3.6.3	Effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the German economy	95
3.6.4	Effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the social economy	96

3.6.5	Effects of the coronavirus pandemic on communication and profiling.....	97
4.	Research methodology.....	100
4.1	Research context.....	100
4.2	Survey with cross-sectional ex-post facto design.....	102
4.3	Recording the constructs.....	103
4.4	Structural equation modelling to verify the correlations.....	105
4.4.1	Measurement and structural model.....	107
4.4.2	Comparison of variance- and covariance-based approaches.....	110
4.4.3	Model quality.....	112
4.4.3.1	Quality criteria for evaluating the measurement models.....	114
4.4.3.2	Quality criteria for evaluating the structural model.....	116
4.4.4	Control variables and socio-demographic moderation effects.....	120
4.5	Description of the sample.....	121
4.6	Structure and design of the online questionnaire.....	123
4.7	Data cleansing and data checking.....	124
4.8	Operationalisation and testing of the variables.....	125
4.8.1	Scales, constructs and variables used.....	125
4.8.2	Socio-demographic variables.....	134
5.	Analysing and interpreting the results.....	135
5.1	Procedure for analysing data.....	135
5.2	Descriptive and exploratory data analysis.....	137
5.3	Statistical testing of the hypotheses.....	139
5.4	Discussion of the research results by construct.....	155
5.4.1	Communication.....	155
5.4.2	Technical readiness.....	157
5.4.3	User friendliness.....	159
5.4.4	Information processing.....	161
5.4.5	Innovative business models.....	162
5.4.6	Service standards.....	164
5.4.7	Corona pandemic.....	165
5.5	Discussion of the research method used.....	167
5.6	Development and design of marketing communication strategies.....	168
5.6.1	Social economy organisation.....	168

5.6.2	Stationary medical supply stores	169
5.6.3	Vocational training organisation.....	170
5.7	Critical appraisal	171
6.	Conclusions.....	173
6.1	Theoretical implications	173
6.2	Practical and management implications	174
6.3	Recommendations for Germany in particular.....	178
6.4	Outlook and need for further research	179
	List of sources	181
	Appendix	200

Keywords

Communication; B2B; Marketing; Strategy; Stakeholders; Social economy; Digitalisation;
Business model; Pandemic; Structural equation model

Summary

In recent decades, social economic organisations (SEOs), particularly in the care sector, have undergone fundamental changes, including increased competition, efficiency gains and the growing importance of customer orientation and digital transformation. These changes are leading to market-orientated management, with financial leeway in the welfare state being restricted, which increases market pressure. Marketing strategies are not yet fully developed in the social sector, although methods from profit-oriented marketing are necessary to successfully market innovative social concepts and bring about the desired changes in customer behaviour. Communication policy plays a decisive role here in order to differentiate oneself in a market with a growing variety of products and services. Communication is a central instrument of corporate management and the marketing mix, which comprises market-orientated, complex activities that are necessary for strategic market cultivation. Integrated communication strategies are necessary in order to achieve specific goals and positively influence customer perception.

Digitalisation is changing business models and shifting the focus to the customer. Traditional value drivers such as net asset value and capitalised earnings value are becoming less important, while innovation and customer focus are gaining in importance. Customers expect customised solutions. SEO is becoming a solution provider. This requires new processes and competencies, a stronger customer focus and organisational profiling.

The service sector, particularly healthcare and social services, is the largest economic sector and is growing continuously. The marketing communication strategy in the B2B sector of the social economy faces challenges such as the increasing environmental dynamics (VUCA world), the integration of generations Y and Z into the world of work, legal and normative adjustments (e.g. GDPR, ISO 9001), advancing digitalisation, organisational culture and knowledge management. The coronavirus pandemic has also had an impact on the industry and B2B customer relationships. Changing customer behaviour and increasing demands for quality, transparency and sustainability require targeted, personalised communication. The challenges for the marketing communication strategy lie in developing suitable concepts in order to act flexibly and adaptably in the VUCA world, to take advantage of the opportunities of digitalisation, to establish a suitable organisational culture and to understand sustainability as an integral part of communication.

This dissertation is dedicated to researching marketing communication in the social economy in a B2B context. The focus is on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on business models and digital communication. Increasing digitalisation and the spread of online platforms have opened up new opportunities for communication and interaction. The use of social media in particular has established itself as an effective tool for targeting B2B customers, (strategically) building relationships and promoting co-creation.

The central research question of this dissertation is: **How can B2B communication in the social economy be innovatively designed so that sustainable cooperation with the respective stakeholders is successful, the profile of the SEO is sharpened and an attractive portfolio design is realised at the same time?**

In the last decade of the 21st century, the structure of organisations and their business models have increasingly changed to reflect the new digital age. These changes are characterised by the development of new technologies and, above all, by the internet in the business ecosystem. Many B2B organisations are turning to digital marketing to improve their customer acquisition. Furthermore, SEOs need to adapt their methods of analysing information in order to make decisions correctly in a changing, flexible and global environment.

The best-known digitalisation concept in the healthcare sector is telemedicine. The competitive nature of the economy motivates companies to place the customer experience at the centre of communication. The term "transformation" or "networking" is often used with the term digitalisation. Innovation, data revolution, blockchain and internationalisation are some of the terms used in discussions about digitalisation and its key tasks. Changes mean that many traditional products and services are now being replaced by disruptive, innovative business models. Digitalisation is radically changing both society and the economic environment. It is fuelling the emergence of new service chains in response to changing customer requirements and evaluations of products and services. Data-supported decisions are being refined and customised through the intelligent use of technology and AI.

Communication is described as a complex construct, understood as social interaction and is at the centre of everyday professional life, particularly in the social economy sector. In the communication process, senders and recipients exchange information and thus influence each other's behaviour. In fact, communication has long played a central role in stakeholder theory. Stakeholders are those who are involved in a project and want to influence its direction and objectives. All stakeholder groups should be taken into account in strategic corporate planning, as marketing is understood as an integrated and market-orientated management concept. Consistent customer orientation is becoming the focus of strategic corporate activity. Although many stakeholder groups are familiar with social media, there is often a lack of clarity as to

what exactly is meant by this. Social media is primarily described as a digital platform that enables users to communicate individually or collectively, exchange ideas and share experiences. Active participation in the communication process provides impetus for the further development of products and services and at the same time optimises targeted marketing measures. Social media offers the opportunity to establish and maintain direct communication relationships with stakeholders online, which were previously mainly possible at the point of sale (POS) or during various events. Social media is seen as a new touchpoint and as an instrument for creating direct communication bridges to any target group. The integration of social media into marketing activities is shaped by three determinants: the change in user behaviour, the shift in the balance of power between stakeholders and the change in marketing itself.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is often used to explain the acceptance of information technologies by users. The implementation of innovative technologies requires adjustments to the ICT system and mindset of the SEO.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a hot topic of discussion in academia and practice due to its potential impact on a company's reputation. Carroll's four-part CSR model focuses on the types of social responsibility (economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibility). The company benefits from active CSR communication. CSR communication promotes awareness of shared social concerns among stakeholders and identification with the company. As a result, stakeholder identification with SEO leads to increased customer loyalty and brand-supporting behaviour. The CSR activities of companies are conceived by all stakeholders in a sustainable dialogue. In order to survive on the market, companies must find suitable strategies. Marketing is, among other things, a process of providing the information needed for planning. Strategic marketing planning begins with a clear and unambiguous definition of the target group, because the volatile changes in the environment require an (anti-fragile) portfolio design. In times of globalisation, transformation, social change and an ever faster changing environment, stakeholders are increasingly acting as image drivers for the company by communicating decisions to the public. The focus of SMEs in B2B brand management is on satisfying the needs of the customer. It is therefore helpful to provide information on product quality and price and to ensure that the defined sales channels are explicitly covered by communication tools. Through social media marketing (SMM), companies try to utilise social media to achieve their own marketing goals and to strengthen the reputation and positioning of the brand. In order to use SMM successfully, it is important that companies develop a smart strategy. Social media can also promote the engagement of the company's stakeholders. Engagement in terms of B2B relationship marketing goes beyond the

simple notion of customer loyalty, as the message content between partners is created through their interaction. Social media is able to turn interactions into a strategic relationship marketing activity or resource.

The literature analysis has demonstrated numerous possibilities for shaping communication in the B2B context. Various (communication) theories and models, instruments and media are used. The use of social media to optimise stakeholder relationships is repeatedly the subject of controversial debate. Correct branding strategy helps above all to secure the positioning of SEO and the perception of its products and services.

In practice, fragmented communication concepts are often found. An integrated application of social media strategies can be a sensible extension of existing marketing tools, which at the same time offers new worlds and opportunities for organisational profiling.

The coronavirus pandemic in particular led to a real surge in digitalisation worldwide. The trends and developments in the environment were also responsible for prompting companies to innovate. The mere existence of networked processes and digital technologies to implement digital business models is not enough. Rather, active management of the transformation is required, taking into account the necessary skills. An SEO and its performance are dependent on the availability of appropriate financial resources, among other things. Another critical resource is therefore the (scarce) personnel in SEOs.

The development of a strategic communication concept requires a separate communication strategy for each communication instrument. This includes defining the target groups, the core messages and the means of communication. A creative process is required to generate an effective communication strategy. The starting point is to analyse the company's situation. This involves identifying the issues relevant to communication with regard to a specific goal as well as strengths and weaknesses.

The social economy sector is characterised by a variety of features that influence marketing. It includes areas that place special demands on social/nursing services. It is also dependent on the specifications and conditions under which the welfare services are realised. A key speciality is that the services are largely immaterial and must be marketed differently to commercial products. Due to the special relationship between the client and the contractor, the classic instruments and methods of marketing are limited. In addition, the financing of the service in the social economy must be taken into account, as the customer does not usually bear the costs, but rather the statutory health insurance. The special features also extend to the fact that there is a variety of stakeholder groups and a budget shortage, and there is a potential for polarisation of the messages. Care services, for example, are confronted with offering their services as cheaply as possible, while relatives and sick people want humane and high-quality care. The

SEO utilises numerous communication tools to achieve its goals. Communication instruments are to be seen as a bundling of similar communication activities and can be categorised as follows: Media advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, PR, sponsorship, personal and social media communication.

The coronavirus pandemic has also had an impact on the political and socio-economic system. As a result of the spread of the coronavirus, there was a massive slump in the global economy and supply bottlenecks, particularly in the medical and care sector. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the social economy in Germany was already facing various challenges, such as digitalisation, an increasing number of elderly people and people in need of care, a shortage of skilled workers, declining interest in this professional field and funding difficulties. The pandemic has helped to exacerbate the problem areas in the social economy. Accordingly, the pandemic has increased the need for SEOs to make structural changes to their organisational processes. Before the coronavirus pandemic, both outpatient and inpatient care service providers used to implement organisational procurement and sales processes primarily by means of print catalogues, forms or even fax machines. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, outpatient care service providers are increasingly using digital technologies for B2B interaction. In principle, the coronavirus pandemic has also made it more difficult for outpatient care services to present themselves to B2B stakeholders and draw attention to their own organisation. In order for the coronavirus pandemic to act as a catalyst for digitalised B2B communication, it was important that support programmes were set up for care service providers.

A non-experimental design, an ex-post-facto design, is chosen as the research method. This design is also (partly) correctly referred to as an observational study, as the researcher only acts as an observer here. Nevertheless, the ex-post-facto design is very common in the social sciences. Within the framework of an ex-post-facto research design, various survey designs can be chosen. In this study, a cross-sectional survey is conducted. The data is collected as part of a one-off survey. This survey design is suitable for providing an inventory of current relationships.

The aim of the cross-sectional survey is to record complex constructs such as communication quality, willingness to use technology or usefulness, whose interactions are to be analysed. However, these constructs cannot be measured or observed directly. All constructs used in this dissertation are modelled using reflective measurement models. The theoretically presented relationships between the constructs collected in the cross-sectional survey are formalised, tested and quantified in a structural equation model (SEM). For this purpose, the theoretically expected correlations are converted into individual empirically testable hypotheses. The

relationships modelled in the SEM generally represent cause-and-effect relationships. The modelled cause-effect relationships give the impression of causal relationships, but the SEM in fact only measures correlations. In the SEM, an equation is formulated for each endogenous variable for the postulated relationship with the respective exogenous variables. All equations together form the system of equations or structural model. When using modern software, such as the SmartPLS used in this thesis, the structural model only needs to be designed by the user as a path model. The software then generates the system of equations from the path model.

As part of the cross-sectional survey, a total of 731 people were contacted in the period from December 2022 to February 2023. Of these 731 people, 84 (successfully) completed the survey. All respondents come from the underlying population of employees in care homes and outpatient care services in Germany. Based on current Destatis statistics, this population is estimated at $N = 1,256,902$ people. The survey was conducted as a combination of an ad hoc sample and a snowball method. SEOs in Germany who utilised a consulting service from HAWE-Service GmbH in 2021 were contacted. The respondents were therefore recruited from the employees of these organisations (random sample) or from people contacted by the employees of these organisations using the snowball method. The online questionnaire was categorised according to the topics of communication (KOMM), technology readiness (TECH), user-friendliness (USAB), information processing (INFO), innovation (INNO), service standards (SERV), coronavirus pandemic (CORO) and socio-demographics. The topics correspond (with the exception of sociodemographics) to the constructs analysed in the SEM. The questionnaire begins with an open question "*What do you spontaneously understand by communication?*" Exhaustive answer options are provided for all further questions, with Likert scales being used almost exclusively. The final design of the questionnaire is the result of a pre-test carried out beforehand. In addition to the description of the scales used in the questionnaire, the focus is on the indicator scales. The scales for the questions on socio-demographic factors are not included in the analysis. In addition to the agreement scales, the online questionnaire used importance scales, frequency scales, scales for assessing one's own abilities and scales for assessing confidence. The socio-demographic variables are included in the structural model as control variables. The socio-demographic variables surveyed are age, gender, highest educational qualification, function in the SEO, branch of the social economy and the country in which the SEO operates.

The postulated hypotheses were tested in SPSS. Firstly, the respective correlations of the individual variables were checked for significance with the aim of creating a clear overall picture. For this purpose, a Pearson correlation coefficient test was carried out in each case, which is suitable in addition to other methods such as the Spearman correlation. The Pearson

correlation coefficient test is a suitable test statistic that measures the statistical relationship between two continuous variables, which was therefore practical for testing the hypotheses. It is considered a suitable method for measuring the relationship between the focussed variables, as it is based on the method of covariance. The model summary generated from SPSS was then used to determine whether a linear correlation exists, how pronounced it is and whether or not it is significant for the population. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was then applied to the data, as an analysis of variance can be used to mathematically determine whether the observed difference is statistically significant. The test generates a p-value, which is a measure of the probability that the observed difference occurred by chance. The SEM was calculated using SmartPLS. The application is justified by the fact that the data and contexts of this research project are very complex. By using SmartPLS, various aspects of multivariate data analysis can be illuminated.

The empirical results show that technological progress has changed traditional communication systems. For years, healthcare companies have increasingly used digital channels in their B2B transactions. Face-to-face communication ($M = 1.61$) is mainly used for professional purposes over online communication, which is almost as popular ($M = 1.89$). In terms of the use of social media in the professional environment, Twitter ($M = 0.93$) is the most frequently used channel, followed by Facebook ($M = 1.20$). Social media such as LinkedIn provides brand awareness as well as customer engagement and allows healthcare providers to promote personal interactions. Respondents indicated that LinkedIn and Xing are used frequently with $SD = 1.73$ each, although less than other channels. They also stated that they mainly use the channels to share their opinions ($SD = 1.36$) and to post activities ($SD = 1.64$) or obtain information ($SD = 1.64$). Half of the experts (42 out of 84) stated that strategic communication in the social economy will be an important marketing parameter in the future.

In the area of technology readiness, most experts stated that they were either very curious (21 out of 71) or curious (38 out of 71) about new technical developments, with only a few respondents seeing technology as an insurmountable challenge (1 out of 71). A large number (30 out of 67) of respondents stated that using social media was relatively easy to learn and a majority (25 out of 67) stated that using these platforms was rather self-explanatory, at least in part. Nevertheless, the question of whether social media is useful for B2B work is rather controversial, with the majority answering partly/partly. Furthermore, the right IT equipment in the workplace makes work easier. The training provided in the CEOs of the respondents reveals some potential, as only 13 people are satisfied with the training they receive. The quality of the training courses in terms of the content taught can be rated rather positively. Furthermore, the results emphasise that most experts (26 out of 54) receive sufficient and timely information

that is intended for their area of work. This also applies beyond their own specialist department (29 out of 54). This is extremely relevant, as in today's social structure, effective information processing is of economic importance for efficient and high-quality care. A constructive, stakeholder-oriented exchange promotes transparency, improves operational efficiency and leads to the realisation of innovative solutions within an ecosystem. The responses to megatrends such as new work, mobility and connectivity placed the respondents in the midfield ($M = 2.59$). SEOs have undergone a fundamental change in recent years with the introduction of new technologies and practices, as business models from outside the industry have colonised the B2B market. These models aim to enable better patient outcomes at lower costs while optimising collaboration and co-creation between stakeholders. SEOs must therefore invest more in strategic planning. Service standards in the social economy refer to predetermined levels of quality, efficiency and customer experience that healthcare providers want to achieve. The experts surveyed stated partly/partly ($M = 2.53$) that their service standards are based on researched customer needs ($M = 2.87$). Service standards also have a high influence on customer satisfaction in the social economy. When healthcare providers meet or exceed service standards, this strengthens trust in the quality of the care service provided. The reliable provision of services and the fulfilment of customer expectations are of fundamental importance for the development of competitive advantages (USP) for an organisational profile. In the context of the "corona pandemic" construct, many respondents ($M = 3.60$) stated that the pandemic had changed the communication behaviour of all stakeholder groups. On average, the organisations reacted flexibly to the pandemic ($M = 3.96$) and the existing ICT technology was largely reliable ($M = 3.74$). The professional handling of the ICT technology ($M = 1.84$) was generally given. The pandemic has also brought about changes in B2B relationships within the care sector. Collaboration, flexibility and trust have become essential characteristics for successful crisis management in uncertain times. Markets have forged new partnerships, participated in knowledge sharing networks and reviewed contractual agreements to mitigate and reduce risk accordingly. Virtual meetings have become important tools to maintain communication while fostering collaboration. COVID-19 has accelerated the digitalisation of B2B markets and this will continue to have an impact on the working world of the future (New Work), which is also confirmed by the majority ($M = 1.96$) of the survey results. Finally, the respondents confirmed that the pandemic is also leaving emotional traces ($M = 2.12$).

Since the turn of the millennium, B2B markets have changed due to increased regulation and centralisation, particularly in the German healthcare and social services sector. These changes emphasise socio-economic organisational models and the importance of social relationships and collaboration.

The digital transformation has had a significant impact on the stationary medical supply trade. B2B marketplaces have gained importance through e-commerce, leading to better inventory management and faster deliveries. Artificial intelligence and predictive analyses are improving supply chain models. Nevertheless, there are challenges, such as data security and legal regulations, that need to be considered during the transition to the digital environment.

Digitalisation has profoundly changed learning and educational research, especially since the coronavirus crisis. Traditional push communication modes are giving way to collaborative approaches supported by digital technologies. Researchers emphasise the importance of a customer-centric approach and personalised communication to foster stronger customer relationships. Challenges exist in the regulatory environment and data protection, especially when using social media for B2B communication.

The study of B2B communication in the healthcare market is of great importance as it provides insights into the relationships between different stakeholders. Despite the complexity of the market and methodological challenges, such as limited samples and cultural differences, the research provides valuable insights. Future research should include broader samples and case studies as well as utilise qualitative methods such as expert interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of communication dynamics.

The dissertation sheds light on a variety of theoretical implications for marketing communication in the B2B social economy in Germany. Central topics are the understanding of the relationships and influences of the scientifically analysed hypotheses, the consideration of regulatory requirements in the social economy sector and the identification of target groups with their needs and communication preferences. Digitalisation influences the search for information and decision-making in the B2B context. Digital channels such as websites, social media and email marketing are important for interacting with the respective customers. Stakeholder theory can be extended by these findings, emphasising the importance of long-term relationships and the diversity of stakeholder interests in the health and social care sector.

An integrated communication policy is crucial in order to communicate the services of a SEO and to stand out from the competition. A structured planning process is necessary, consisting of situation analysis, target definition, target group definition, strategy development and budget allocation. The special features of the social economy, such as financing by cost bearers, the necessary relationship of trust between the stakeholders and the anti-fragile portfolio design must be taken into account in post-corona times. Future research should focus on advanced technologies such as blockchain and IoT. The digital transformation requires adjustments to data protection and data security to ensure user trust.

In the German B2B healthcare market, companies should focus their marketing strategies more strongly on the needs of their customers, have a digital presence and engage in relevant networks. Long-term partnerships and personalised marketing approaches are important. Companies should organise training courses and webinars in order to be perceived as competent partners. Marketing activities must be regularly evaluated and adapted to improve their effectiveness. The use of data analysis tools can help to optimise marketing strategies.

Future B2B marketing communication strategies include the aspects of digitalisation, customer orientation, innovation and sustainability. Companies need to develop adaptive strategies to remain competitive. The dissertation has limitations such as the sample size and the limitation to Germany. Further research should include larger samples and include other EU countries. Additional studies can investigate the digitalisation of communication and communication behaviour in the post-corona era. Interdisciplinary approaches could shed light on the role of language and culture in the social economy. The dissertation aims to broaden the understanding of B2B communication and provide practical insights to innovate and optimise sustainable communication strategies.