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# The three worlds of strategic communication. The dimensions of performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal—and their potential for strategic communication research

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**Introduction:** In strategic communication research, it is widely recognized that attitudes and ultimately decisions are influenced by a variety of content-related factors. Specialist disciplines such as public relations, cause-related marketing and emotional branding have emerged in communication practice to deal with individual aspects. However, as specialists are only interested in their own area, this paper argues for an integrating perspective.

**Method:** The diverse factors are condensed into three dimensions based on Habermas' three-world concept: perceived and decision-related performance, legitimacy and emotional appeal. The conceptual-programmatic paper aims to demonstrate the connectivity and potential of this triad for the central research paradigms.

**Results:** For the interpretative paradigm, the specific relevance and the constructive character of the three dimensions are elaborated. The functional-instrumental paradigm shows that the overlaps between the various stakeholder relationships are greatest in the dimension of legitimacy. Finally, dystopian societal scenarios are developed for the critical paradigm.

**KEYWORDS**

emotional appeal, Habermas, legitimacy, performance, reputation, strategic communication

## 1 Introduction

40 years ago, the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1985) formulated validity claims for statements in his theory of communicative action. Pursuant to this, statements must prove themselves to be true and purposeful, normatively appropriate, and subjectively truthful. Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) later used these fundamental communication theory considerations as the basis for their reputation theory. Accordingly, organizations would have to prove themselves in precisely three dimensions—the functional, social, and expressive dimensions. The factors in more empirically derived approaches to reputation (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004; Schwaiger, 2004; Riel and Fombrun, 2007; overview in Veh et al., 2019) can also be assigned to these three dimensions. Finally, research on decision factors for product purchases (Knez et al., 2014), stock purchases (Hoffmann and Fieseler, 2012; Hoffmann et al., 2018) or job choice (Purohit et al., 2021) also seems to support the plausibility of these three dimensions.

The triad of true and successful, normatively right, and subjectively truthful and attractive has clearly proven itself in some contexts. It is theoretically plausible, seems capable of explaining decisions empirically, and also provides a suitable framework for critical analyses. Therefore, it is highly surprising how little consideration has been given to the triad in strategic communication research. Although categories such as true and successful, normatively right, and subjectively truthful and attractive have been addressed repeatedly in prior research, surprisingly large gaps remain. *First*, studies typically consider only one dimension (e.g., emotional branding; Gobé, 2001; Acharya, 2019; Kim and Sullivan, 2019) and only rarely two (e.g., Feng et al., 2022). *Second*, there are entire areas of research in which one of the dimensions has been almost completely overlooked to date. Habermas (1985) had already noted the neglect of expressive truthfulness and emotions in the social science literature at the time. For PR and strategic communications research, these aspects are still largely *terra incognita* (Holtzhausen, 2002; Pieczka, 2006; Yeomans, 2007; Zhang and Adegbola, 2022). *Third*, studies that examine the relationships among the dimensions remain the exception. More specifically, we still know little about how strengths in one dimension might compensate for deficits in another.

This conceptual and programmatic paper aims to highlight the connectivity and potential of the triad for the three paradigms of strategic communication research. However, the aim is not to develop a new theoretical framework of the three-world theory. *Rather, the aim is to demonstrate, for the interpretative, functional-instrumental, and critical paradigms, (a) the discourses to which this triad can be connected and (b) the added value and potential that arise when all of its dimensions are systematically considered. The paper therefore serves as a plea to account for all three dimensions in both research and practice—or, at the very least, to remain mindful of the implications for the other two when emphasizing one dimension.* To this end, the conceptual paper advances propositions regarding the relationships among the three dimensions and outlines possible operationalizations for empirical research. The occasionally abstract considerations are illustrated with examples drawn from various social fields.

The paper first outlines the path from Habermas (1985) to Eisenegger and Imhof (2008). In contrast to previous approaches, the paper focuses on perceived and decision-related information. The three dimensions are referred to in the paper as performance, legitimacy, and emotional attractiveness. These dimensions are first explained in detail from an interpretative perspective, and their constructive character is outlined. Subsequently, the functional-instrumental paradigm is used to show references to and between existing approaches. It becomes clear how much all three dimensions are already incorporated into some discourses, while others neglect emotional attractiveness in particular. In the final section, the critical paradigm shows how the three dimensions can be used to develop six dystopian social scenarios.

It becomes clear that the adaptation of Habermas' (1985) triad offers a framework for strategic communication research in order to contextualize its sometimes extremely specific questions and to identify relationships. In this way, the centrifugal forces that arise from the increasing specialization and differentiation both in communication practice and in strategic communication research

can be at least somewhat contained. If the three dimensions influence decisions to varying degrees, the task for communication practice is to systematically analyze and consider their relevance for different decision-making contexts. For as much as the dimensions have of course already been taken into account in many places, there is still the impression that this usually happens rather randomly and without reliable findings. The application of the triad is thus an example of how a scientific concept can be a helpful tool for communication practice.

## 2 From the three-world concept to the three dimensions of strategic communication

Science is a master of bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Mateus and Sarkar, 2024). Ideas are adopted and combined with other thoughts, while the original context fades into the background. Popper's (1972, 1979) three-world concept has also undergone such a development. Habermas applied Popper's epistemological three-world concept to his theory of action and communication. Popper's (1972, 1979) three worlds still focussed on different realms of reality: physical objects, subjective experiences and abstract knowledge. Knowledge (world 3) has a life of its own beyond human cognition (world 2) and the physical world (world 1). Habermas adapted these ideas to emphasize how individuals engage with and justify their statements in communication. Habermas thus aligns Popper's concepts with his focus on communicative rationality and the social processes of understanding. This further development of Habermas is the starting point of the present paper, but the communication theory framework with the action model of communicative action will only be referred to here. It is therefore not about a "slavish" application of Habermas' communication theory, but about an adaptation of his triad in the various paradigms in order to be able to demonstrate the enormous potential of this triad.

While many different concepts by Habermas have been received in international PR and strategic communication research (Buhmann et al., 2019), the three-world concept has found little acceptance to date. It has been taken up by a few authors on strategic communication (Burkart, 2004, 2007; Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008; Eisenegger, 2009; Kernstock and Brexendorf, 2009). In his adaptation of Popper's three-world concept (1972), Habermas (1985) distinguishes between different validity claims of statements: in the objective world, this is truth; in the social world, correctness; and in the subjective world, truthfulness. In order to prove oneself in all three worlds, a separate model of action has developed for each: teleological, normative, and dramaturgical action. Habermas distinguishes these models of action from his communicative action as a fourth model, in which the additional claim to validity of the orientation toward understanding leads the three other claims to validity to be called into question and, if necessary, discussed.

Eisenegger and Imhof (2008); Eisenegger (2009, 2005) developed their reputation theory on the basis of Habermas' three-world concept. The three worlds are each characterized by a specific rationality of action and assessment that determines the

logic of reputation constitution. Eisenegger and Imhof develop the functional, social, and expressive dimensions from the three worlds or validity claims. In the functional dimension, organizations must meet the functional performance requirements of their social subsystem. In the social dimension, they must comply with moral standards. In the expressive dimension, they must establish an attractive and distinctive identity. If an organization builds a strong reputation, it benefits in several ways: reputation strengthens customer trust, increases employee loyalty, and reduces control and regulatory pressure (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008).

The three-world concept by Habermas (1985) and the adaptation by Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) offer a theoretically based systematization of how statements must prove themselves in concrete terms and how constructs such as reputation or attitudes can be concretized. The direct references by Habermas (1985) to Popper (1972, 1979) and by Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) to Weber (2019) show the relevance and plausibility of this triad even beyond Habermas' communication-theoretical framework. In the following chapters, the three dimensions are explained further and referred to as the dimensions of performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal.

As plausible as the adaptation of the three-world concept to the reputation theory of Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) is, its adaptation limits the explanatory potential of the three-world concept significantly. While the organization-related reputation of Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) has the advantage of being able to compare organizations via reputation as a whole, it has the disadvantage that reputation does not take other relevant sources, such as direct experience or advertising, into account, or only very indirectly at best. In concrete terms, this deficit is also reflected in the fact that Eisenegger and Imhof—in contrast to other reputation approaches (Fombrun et al., 2000)—measure reputation exclusively by content analysis of media coverage (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). Even if media coverage can be understood in part as the result of social discourse, it is only one source that influences attitudes and decisions. It also has the disadvantage that reputation as an overall estimation of a company by its stakeholders (Fombrun, 1996) refers to general information about an organization as a whole. Although a “general” good reputation also has an effect on various stakeholder decisions (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004; Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008), large differences in the relevance of reputation can be expected for different organization-related decisions.

Therefore, the paper suggests turning away from the organizational focus toward the actor focus. From an empirical-methodological perspective, this involves a move away from content analysis, as in Eisenegger and Imhof, toward investigating the effects through surveys. Firstly, it is about *perceived* performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal. This is based, for example, on personal experience, the experience of acquaintances, media reports, or classic strategic communication such as advertising. Second, it appears more plausible to focus on specific decision-making situations. For example, when purchasing a luxury fashion item, the emotional appeal of a dress or suit is likely to play a particularly important role, whereas when purchasing shares in a luxury fashion manufacturer, economic performance is likely to be the primary concern. This suggests the need to attend to

*decision-related* aspects of performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal. In the following, the decision reference is understood to mean that performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal are always reflected in the end with reference to a concrete decision. The paper thus focuses on (a) *perceived* (b) *decision-related performance, legitimacy and emotional appeal*. Although strategic communication initially targets attitudes in particular, it ultimately aims to influence behavior and thus decisions in the interest of the positively described by motivating the adoption of a specific follow-up option (Hamilton and Johnson, 2020; Hoffjann, 2021, 2024).

In order to demonstrate the connectivity and potential of the three dimensions, these considerations are concretized below for the three paradigms of strategic communication research (Trujillo and Toth, 1987). With the interpretative paradigm, the individual dimensions—based on Habermas and Weber—will first be derived and justified in more detail. Although Jürgen Habermas is regarded as a representative of the critical paradigm and his theory of communicative action also pursues a critical approach, his considerations have often found their way into other paradigms (Deetz, 1992). This also applies to the interpretative paradigm of “Communication as Constitutive of Organization” (CCO): “Linking Habermas' ideas to scholarship in the CCO domain seems like a natural fit. He has developed a general theory of society that considers communication as the cornerstone of social theory building and critical analysis.” (Schoeneborn and Sandhu, 2013; Scherer and Rasche, 2017, p. 4) The functional paradigm uses selected concepts to show how strategic communication 'processes' the three worlds. Finally, the critical paradigm shows how criticism of strategic communication can be systematized and, at the same time, open up new perspectives.

### 3 Interpretative paradigm

The interpretative paradigm focuses on symbolic aspects of organizational life (Trujillo and Toth, 1987): how are social and organizational meaning constructed and defined? This includes, for example, social constructivist and subsequently also neo-institutionalist approaches (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), as well as communication theory approaches such as the CCO approaches (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). For Habermas' three-world concept, this basically means that the three normative validity claims in the interpretative perspective become the dimensions of sensemaking and reality construction.

In the following, the three dimensions will first be derived on the basis of (a) Habermas' (1985) considerations in order to then explain the (b) *relevance of the dimension for different decisions*. Subsequently, the (c) *constructive character of criteria or indicators* in the respective dimension will be explained. From an interpretative perspective, it can be shown that the criteria for good performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal are the result of negotiation and construction processes and, therefore, are subject to change—albeit to very different degrees (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In this perspective, communication is understood as an “ongoing process of making sense of the circumstances in which

people collectively find themselves and of the events that affect them” (Taylor and Van Every, 1999, p. 58). In the literature, this co-creational and co-constructive character is often taken up when talking about co-constructed responsibility (Schultz et al., 2013) or co-creation of brands (Hansen, 2021; Hansen et al., 2022). If the three dimensions can jointly explain the decisions of a company’s stakeholders and if they are socially constructed and thus changeable, the final question is how organizations attempt to influence these social rules and institutions with (d) *strategic communication*. The concept of institutional work is used for this purpose (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Fredriksson and Pallas, 2014).

### 3.1 Dimension of performance

In the three-world concept of (a) Habermas (1985), the focus in the objective world is on the validity claim of truth and subsequently on effectiveness and efficiency. The corresponding model of action is teleological action: “The actor attains an end or brings about the occurrence of a desired state by choosing means that have promise of being successful in the given situation and applying them in a suitable manner. The central concept is that of a decision among alternative courses of action, with a view to the realization of an end, guided by maxims, and based on an interpretation of the situation” (Habermas, 1985, p. 85). The focus is therefore on goal-oriented action, which is familiar from decision-theoretic and game-theoretic approaches in economics, sociology, and social psychology (Habermas, 1985).

In the objective world, it is, therefore, a matter of rationality of purpose (Weber, 2019) to achieve the set purposes as effectively and efficiently as possible with the available means. The truth claim of the objective world is reflected in the fact that success or failure is considered empirically measurable and can thus be proven or disproven (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). Specific indicators have been developed in each functional system, such as business, politics, science, sport, or the media, which are used to evaluate success (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). For companies, this is primarily profit, for political parties it is electoral success, for academia it is publication output and for an NGO it is the number of supporters and societal influence. This dimension should be referred to as the *dimension of performance*, as this term, in contrast to alternative terms such as Habermas’ objective world or the functional dimension of Eisenegger and Imhof, makes it clear that it is about a perceived problem solution and therefore success in the respective context.

From a (b) *decision-related perspective*, the relevance of good perceived performance is obvious, as the following examples illustrate: when making decisions, investors are interested in the development of the share price and company profits, among other things. Buyers of washing powder ask themselves how reliably it removes stains, while employees look at the salary level and economic stability of a company. The examples show that there are different indicators for attributing success and failure not only at the level of a social subsystem such as the economy, but also downstream in various decisions, such as the purchase of

products or shares. The example of job choice also shows how performance indicators from different decision-making contexts can be relevant: for example, employees will be interested not only in salary levels but also in the success of the company, as job security depends on this (Gokuladas, 2010). The diversity of performance indicators across different decision-making contexts provides an initial indication that a uniform set of items cannot be assumed.

The question of the (c) *constructive character* of performance indicators may come as a surprise since, according to Habermas, they not only satisfy the truth claim of the objective world by being empirically measurable—on the basis of agreed methods (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). Additionally, many indicators of the performance dimension—such as company profit when buying shares or salary when making a job choice (Purohit et al., 2021)—have an institutionalized character in that they are generally no longer questioned as a relevant criterion when making a decision (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This also applies, for example, when buying a car, where various performance indicators can play a role: the engine power, the size of the trunk, the number of doors, the fuel consumption, etc. Despite this diversity, the set of relevant performance criteria remains fairly limited (Knez et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the constructive nature of performance indicators and their volatility require that the suitability of corresponding sets be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

The constructive nature of this is reflected in the fact that the performance indicators themselves are the result of negotiation and institutionalization processes and therefore can be changed, at least in the medium term. For example, when buying a car, fuel consumption has become more relevant with increasing fuel prices and the growing debate on climate change (Abu-Alkeir, 2020; Nerurkar et al., 2023). This brings us to institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Fredriksson and Pallas, 2014). Organizations try to strengthen institutions and thus defend them or establish new ones. With strategic communication, they can try to protect institutional values, norms, and rules or, conversely, criticize them, for example by establishing new norms and rules and thus changing markets (Vargo and Lusch, 2017; Baker et al., 2019). One example of such institutional work is the use of animals as attractions in circuses. Cirque du Soleil has managed to weaken this institutionalized expectation and, in its place, to strengthen alternative performance indicators (Baker et al., 2019).

Since changing existing institutions and creating new ones is laborious and often futile for individual organizations, (d) *strategic communication* usually aims to focus performance communication on the established performance indicators in which the company is particularly good. In this way, they signal which institutionalized expectations they meet in a particular way. Ideally, an offer fulfills all minimum requirements and is better than the competition with regards to an important indicator (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). The role and relevance of strategic communication in the performance dimension varies greatly depending on the decision-making context. It is particularly high in the purchase of classic high-involvement goods, such as automobiles (Rekha and Chauhan, 2017).

### 3.2 Dimension of legitimacy

In the social world, (a) Habermas (1985) focuses on the validity claim of “normative rightness” (Habermas, 1985, p. 50). This refers to “the rightness of an action in respect to an existing normative context signifies that the interpersonal relation established merits recognition as a legitimate element of the social world” (Habermas, 1985, p. 50). The social world determines which interactions are recognized as legitimate. The corresponding type of action is normative or norm-regulated action, which refers to “members of a social group who orient their action to common values” (Habermas, 1985, p. 85). The social world is therefore concerned with (not) following norms.

In contrast to the rationality of purpose in the objective world and the (non-) achievement of set goals, the focus in the social world is on value rationality (Weber, 2019) and thus the overall social legitimacy of actions and statements. This brings categories such as integrity and corporate responsibility into focus (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). This dimension will be referred to as the *dimension of legitimacy*, as Habermas’ concepts of the social world and Eisenegger and Imhof’s social dimension appear to be too unspecific.

Why are norm-regulated actions important in (b) *decisions*? While in medieval hierarchically organized societies, the king or religious leader determined what was appropriate or inappropriate, such a central authority has been lost in modern societies (Luhmann, 2012). As a result, it has become more difficult to negotiate what is understood by the majority as appropriate and legitimate. Moreover, developments such as individualization and reflexive modernization (Beck et al., 1994) have further exacerbated this and led to growing legitimation pressure for organizations. For instance, the moralization of markets (Stehr et al., 2011) and thus of consumption can be understood as a means of preventing a further drifting apart of social subsystems with their conflicting rationalities of purpose. As a result, legitimacy as a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574) increasingly influences more decisions. However, this applies to very different degrees—it is likely to be less pronounced in financial markets than in other markets (Fieseler, 2011).

In the dimension of legitimacy, the (c) *construction character* of the indicators is more obvious than in the dimension of performance. “Different actors such as corporations, government institutions, the media, and consumers organize and negotiate knowledge about the meaning and expectations to corporate responsibility” (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 685; Caruana and Crane, 2008). In contrast to instrumental and political-normative views on CSR, such an interpretative and communicative view on CSR focuses on the co-constructed, conflictive, and disintegrative aspects (Schultz et al., 2013). How important these expectations are and to what extent they are institutionalized is therefore subject to a constant communicative negotiation and meaning-making process. Thus, CSR itself can be understood as an ambiguous concept (Lockett et al., 2006; Guthey and Morsing, 2014). Even if there seems to be a momentary consensus, this can be called

into question and re-discussed at any time. Moreover, when many organizations work in parallel to defend and weaken existing institutions through institutional work and at the same time try to establish new institutions, it becomes clear (DiMaggio, 1988; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Fredriksson and Pallas, 2014) that there is a constant struggle in the dimension of legitimacy—such as, for example, the acceptance of different energy sources in the discussion on climate change (Antonini et al., 2021)—and that it is extremely difficult to change institutional expectations. While concrete expectations within the dimension of legitimacy are subject to substantial change—more so than in the dimension of performance—it nevertheless appears possible to develop items in this dimension that are applicable across very different fields. For example, the following items from Schwaiger (2004) study on corporate reputation could, with appropriate revision, also be suitable for other contexts, such as electoral decision-making: “(company) behaves in a socially conscious way,” “I have the feeling that (company) is not only concerned about profit,” “I have the impression that (company) has a fair attitude toward competitors,” and “I have the impression that (company) is forthright in providing information to the public” (Schwaiger, 2004, p. 60).

What role does (d) *strategic communication* play in the dimension of legitimacy? According to Suchman (1995) and Seele and Gatti (2017), organizations can fall back on three normatively very different strategies in the social dimension. They can use isomorphic adaptation to emphasize that they meet societal expectations in order to achieve cognitive legitimacy. Alternatively, they can try to manipulate stakeholder perception through strategic manipulation in order to achieve pragmatic legitimacy. This is where greenwashing occurs. Moral legitimacy can be assessed much more positively if thanks to deliberative discourse organizational communication and societal expectation are in line.

### 3.3 Dimension of emotional appeal

In the subjective world, (a) Habermas (1985, p. 50) is concerned with the validity claim of “expressive sincerity”. The corresponding type of action is dramaturgical action, in which Habermas refers to Goffman (1959):

“The actor evokes in his public a certain image, an impression of himself, by more or less purposefully disclosing his subjectivity. Each agent can monitor public access to the system of his own intentions, thoughts, attitudes, desires, feelings, and the like, to which only he has privileged access. In dramaturgical action, participants make use of this and steer their interactions through regulating mutual access to their own subjectivities. Thus, the central concept of presentation of self does not signify spontaneous expressive behavior but stylizing the expression of one’s own experiences with a view to the audience.” (Habermas, 1985, p. 86)

On the part of the observer, this is concerned with truthfulness and the subjective impression of uniqueness and attractiveness (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). The criteria of this *dimension of*

*emotional appeal* are even more arbitrary due to their strictly subjective character. Here, truthfulness is the perceived realness or authenticity (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008), which can be understood as a prerequisite for positive emotional appeal. In other words: an appearance that is perceived to be inauthentic can hardly lead to positive emotional appeal.

What (b) *relevance does the dimension have for different decisions?* Weber (2019) already made clear with the charismatic rule type how important the holiness, heroic power, or exemplary nature of a person can be for the legitimacy of rule (Wæraas, 2009). Since Herbert Simons' bounded rationality (1967; 1983), the relevance of emotions has been widely accepted. In view of this, however, it is surprising that Habermas' (1985) assessment still holds true that expressive truthfulness or related concepts such as emotions are less clearly developed and elaborated in the social science literature than the other two validity claims (Lerner et al., 2015). In recent years, these aspects have become even more relevant as a result of the discussion on the post-truth society (Harsin, 2018), among other things, when doubts about the possibilities of recognizing truth lead to emotions, thus making emotional appeal even more important.

Since the subjective attribution of emotional appeal is neither subject to justification nor capable of justification (Imhof, 2006), the indicators have an almost arbitrary (c) *constructive character* and can therefore only be mentioned as examples. It begins with the attributed attractiveness (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008) of people, products, buildings, or design, can continue with the entertaining nature of a company or person, and does not end with positive surprises (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004) or an unconventional appearance (Wæraas, 2009). Such emotional appeal can result in a perceived uniqueness of the organization.

The sometimes almost arbitrary character of the emotional appeal criteria is limited somewhat by fashions, which in turn are constantly changing, and by stable public images at best. While a stable public image of organizations in the other two dimensions can be changed more easily through fact-based communication, this is much more difficult in the dimension of emotional appeal. This illustrates the interpretative understanding of brands. The co-constructive character of meaning is reflected here in the co-creational character of brands, which are ultimately built by various stakeholders (Iglesias et al., 2017). In this perspective, management and their employees are merely authors who develop a coherent brand narrative and submit it to the other stakeholders as a proposal (Hansen, 2021; Hansen et al., 2022). In other words: the relative stability of successful brands such as Apple and Nike is then at least as much due to stakeholders and customers as to the companies themselves. The dimension of emotional appeal is similar to the dimension of legitimacy: despite its largely contingent nature, it appears possible to develop a set of items within this dimension that can be applied across very different fields. As in the legitimacy dimension, items from Schwaiger (2004) study on corporate reputation could, with minor revisions, also be suitable for other contexts, such as electoral decision-making. Examples include "I regard (company) as a likable company" and "I like the physical appearance of (company) (company buildings, branch offices)" (Schwaiger, 2004, p. 60).

In a positive case, the emotional appeal can be so great that it compensates for deficits in the dimensions of performance and legitimacy. The political examples cited below demonstrate that the triad of performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal can also be applied to decision-making beyond the corporate sphere, such as voting decisions. Boris Johnson's temporary success, for instance, can be attributed primarily to his charisma, which was widely recognized and valued by the public (De Landtsheer et al., 2021). At the very least, however, the emotional repulsive forces should not be so great that even outstanding performance and normative strengths cannot compensate for them—as was the case with former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Lopez, 2024). Conversely, the dimensions of performance and legitimacy can have a major influence on emotional appeal (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). For example, a violation of standards that is seen as despicable can lead to very negative emotions such as anger and resentment and, thus, to emotional antipathy—as was the case with Volkswagen after the diesel scandal (Ewing, 2017). Conversely, very good and innovative products (such as Tesla for a long time), as well as a highly considerate corporate policy (e.g., The Body Shop) can strengthen emotional appeal (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). The question of the relevance of (d) *strategic communication* is superfluous, as the core is the staging of one's own appearance and, thus, strategic communication.

### 3.4 Interim conclusion

It has become clear how important the triad of perceived performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal is for the individual and social construction of reality and meaning. Organizations, people or products obviously have to prove themselves in these three dimensions—albeit to a very different and sometimes varying extent—if they want to sell shares or products. While the purchase of a standardized commodity such as natural gas is usually made almost exclusively on the basis of a performance criterion such as price, in crisis situations such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, legitimacy can suddenly become important. It has also become clear to what extent the criteria of the individual dimensions are the result of social construction processes (Table 1). While the criteria in the performance dimension are largely institutionalized and stable, they are subject to constant negotiation processes in the legitimacy dimension and are largely arbitrary in the emotional appeal dimension. Above all, however, it has become clear how interwoven the three dimensions are—in other words, how they influence each other. On the one hand, this makes it difficult to analyze social construction processes, for example. On the other hand, it shows the relevance of observing all three dimensions equally.

This raises the question of the relevance and interrelationships among the three dimensions. Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) have suggested that organizations must meet expectations regarding legitimacy and performance, while distinguishing themselves through emotional appeal. This can also be understood as the normative ideal for an organization, brand, or politician: a combination of strong performance, legitimacy, and an appealing presence. As plausible as this principle may seem, closer

TABLE 1 The three dimensions in the interpretative paradigm.

	Dimension of performance	Dimension of legitimacy	Dimension of emotional appeal
<b>Validity claim according to Habermas (1985)</b>	Objective truth or effectiveness	Normative rightness	Subjective truthfulness
<b>Criteria (examples)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effectiveness and efficiency in solving the problem</li> <li>Durability</li> <li>Price</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Taking stakeholder interests into account</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Authenticity or truthfulness</li> <li>Attractiveness</li> <li>Entertainingness</li> <li>Unconventionality</li> <li>Surprise</li> </ul>
<b>Degree of institutionalization of the criteria</b>	High	Medium	Low
<b>The role of strategic communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In general: emphasize the particular strengths of existing expectations</li> <li>In exceptions: Establish new evaluation criteria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reference to fulfillment of societal expectations (cognitive legitimacy)</li> <li>Manipulation of stakeholder perception (pragmatic legitimacy)</li> <li>Establishing a consensus as the result of deliberative discourse (moral legitimacy)</li> </ul>	Emphasize uniqueness
<b>Relevance of strategic communication</b>	Low to medium	Medium to high	High

examination reveals numerous exceptions. To address this, the tectonic differences and shifts across the three dimensions of meaning (Luhmann, 2012) will be described.

In the *factual dimension*, the relevance of each dimension can be observed in purchasing decisions across different product categories and, more specifically, between brands. For example, what differences in perceived decision-related performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal exist between buying a car and buying a bicycle? At the brand level, how do specific car brands differ from one another in these dimensions?

The *social dimension* focuses on similarities and differences across groups. This begins with comparative studies at the international level, where, for example, the relevance of the legitimacy dimension is likely to vary significantly (Pucci et al., 2022), which in turn may increase the relative importance of the other dimensions. The analysis of similarities and differences can also be extended to different types of buyers within a single product category. Compared with existing approaches, such as psychographic segmentation (e.g., Blömker and Albrecht, 2024), the triad offers the advantage of directly linking attitudes to requirements for strategic communication planning.

In the *time dimension*, the focus is on identifying which events alter the relative relevance of the dimensions—that is, which events particularly reveal their constructed nature. This can be illustrated using the example of crises. Research on crisis communication could examine how different crisis triggers (e.g., a product defect affecting the performance dimension vs. a corruption scandal affecting the legitimacy dimension) influence the three dimensions and, consequently, decision-making intentions. More fundamentally, it could be explored whether, for instance, during economic crises, the rational performance dimension becomes more salient in purchasing decisions, while the

other two dimensions are perceived as “luxuries” and decline in importance (Di Crosta et al., 2021).

## 4 Functional-instrumental paradigm

The interpretative perspective has made it clear how the triad can explain the decisions of a company's stakeholders and that the criteria of the dimensions are socially constructed and can, therefore, be changed. The functional-instrumental paradigm will now be used to work out which approaches and practices are used to process the three dimensions. In this chapter at the latest, Habermas' claim of consensus and mutual understanding no longer plays a role. The functional-instrumental paradigm (Trujillo and Toth, 1987) has long dominated PR and strategic communication research. Approaches of this paradigm seek answers to the question of how organizations can best maintain their social order and how a problem in organizations can be dealt with effectively and efficiently. The functional-instrumental paradigm has given rise to a confusing variety and multitude of approaches that deal with one or more dimensions at very different levels. Since management-oriented approaches are rarely interested in analytical-scientific distinctions, the presentation of these concepts does not follow the three dimensions. First, (1) *an organization-wide specialized approach* is explained, which deals with one dimension for the entire organization. Then, using the example of selected (2) *decision-related specialized approaches*, such as purchasing decisions, it will be shown which concepts are used to process a dimension in a specific decision-making situation.

The (3) *generalizing approaches*, which—at least implicitly—take into account all dimensions for the entire organization,

include in particular the approaches to *reputation* (Fombrun, 1996; Schwaiger, 2004; Riel and Fombrun, 2007; Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008; Veh et al., 2019). As these have already been explained, they will not be presented in more detail here. They take into account all dimensions with different systematizations and show the fundamental relevance for all organization-related decisions. Although some specific stakeholder relationships are taken into account—e.g. workplace environment and financial performance, products and services (Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007)—they emphasize the relevance of reputation for the overall organization and thus neglect the special features of the various stakeholder relationships. In concepts of *integrated marketing communications*, the dimensions are at best only marginally (e.g., dimension of emotional appeal) or implicitly addressed (Schultz et al., 1994; Batra and Keller, 2016).

## 4.1 Organization-wide specialized approach

Organization-wide specialized approaches process one of the three dimensions exclusively for all decision-making contexts. In the dimension of legitimacy, the classic organization-wide specialist is public relations. (Metzler, 2001 p. 321) states “that establishing and maintaining organizational legitimacy is at the core of most, if not all, public relations activities” (similar: Everett, 2001; author/s, 2011; Holmström, 2005; Massey, 2001). Why is the dimension of legitimacy essentially dealt with by a specialized discipline and why does it have an impact on many specific decision-making contexts? While the specific performance indicators are relevant for decisions such as the purchase of a product, a share, or a job choice, *the overall organizational legitimacy affects all decisions* to a very different extent, so that the normatively correct behavior of the entire organization is relevant in the dimension of legitimacy (Hoffmann and Fieseler, 2012; e.g., Carlini et al., 2019). In addition to this overall organizational legitimacy, which has a very different influence on all organizational decisions, there are other decision-related aspects of legitimacy. In marketing communication, this includes, for example, how customer complaints are handled (Knox and Van Oest, 2014) or fairness toward employees in employer branding (Carlini et al., 2019). However, since these decision-related aspects of legitimacy can always have an impact on other decisions—e.g. fairness toward employees when making purchasing decisions—ultimately, PR can be understood as keeping an eye on all legitimacy-relevant aspects of an organization.

Successful legitimacy is also influenced by the other two dimensions. The relevance of performance for legitimacy was already emphasized by Carroll (1991) when he highlighted the relevance of profit for corporate social responsibility. Economically relevant and successful companies that create many jobs and pay taxes will find it easier to gain legitimacy. For emotional appeal, Wæraas (2009), following Weber (2019) charismatic legitimacy, highlighted the need for charismatic organizational character through PR. At the same time, it is clear that the topic of emotional appeal is still largely neglected, particularly in functional-instrumental approaches to PR research. To this day, rational

economic goals dominate (Holtzhausen, 2002; Van Ruler, 2005; Yeomans, 2007; Zhang and Adegbola, 2022).

## 4.2 Decision-related specialized approaches

Individual approaches and practices that deal with one dimension in a selected stakeholder relationship must be distinguished from organization-wide specialized approaches.

In all *economic decision-making contexts*, such as the purchase of a product or shares and job choice, the focus has traditionally been on the purpose-oriented performance dimension. Marketing communication (Rossiter and Bellman, 2012), investor relations (Fieseler, 2011), and employer branding (Purohit et al., 2021) name performance-oriented reasons for purchasing. Originally, these were rational benefits such as the traditional benefit-based “USP” advertising strategy (Rossiter and Bellman, 2012). However, it quickly became apparent that rational performance advantages did not really allow for differentiation from competitors in most markets. As a result, in advertising, for example, emotional appeal is now more important than information or rational appeal (Zhang et al., 2014; Casais and Pereira, 2021). While the focus on rational performance-oriented reasons for primarily economic decisions has been abandoned, approaches have emerged in marketing communication that specialize in processing a single dimension in a decision-making context.

The growing relevance of the dimension of legitimacy in marketing communication is illustrated by the concept of *cause-related marketing*, which can generally be understood as a general alliance between businesses and non-profit causes that provide resources and funding to address social issues and business marketing objectives (Bhatti et al., 2023). *Emotional branding*, on the other hand, offers a set of tools to connect products to the consumer in an emotionally profound way (Gobé, 2001; Acharya, 2019; Kim and Sullivan, 2019). This approach addresses the growing trend for consumers to seek emotional relationships with a brand. Unlike information such as product attributes, features, and facts, personal feelings and experiences better shape consumers’ evaluations of brands (Kim and Sullivan, 2019, p. 1; Table 2).

Although the dimensions of legitimacy and emotional appeal are also becoming more important and appear to play an increasingly important role in other economic decisions, such as the purchase of shares (Fieseler, 2011; Hoffmann and Fieseler, 2012) and job choice (Carlini et al., 2019), fewer concrete approaches and practices have emerged here. In the functional-instrumental literature, the increasing relevance of criteria beyond the dimension of performance is usually taken into account, e.g., by pointing out references to the CSR discourse for aspects of the dimension of legitimacy (e.g., Carlini et al., 2019).

How relevant are the three dimensions for decisions beyond economic relationships? Finally, this will be briefly illustrated using the example of *public affairs*, where the focus is on decisions made by politicians, residents, and other critical stakeholders in relation to a company (McGrath et al., 2010). While legitimacy is the dominant dimension here, the performance dimension takes center stage when a company’s economic importance for a region

TABLE 2 Examples of functional-instrumental approaches.

	Dimension of performance	Dimension of legitimacy	Dimension of emotional appeal
<b>Generalizing approaches</b> Processing of all dimensions for the entire organization	<i>Approaches to reputation management &amp; Integrated Marketing Communications</i>		
<b>Organization-wide specialized approaches</b> Processing one dimension for the entire organization	—	Public relations	—
<b>Decision-related specialized approaches</b> Processing a dimension for a decision context	—	Cause-related marketing	Emotional branding

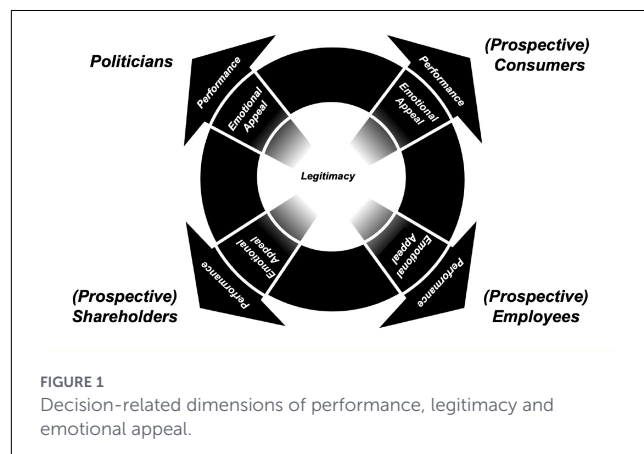
or country is used as an argumentative lever to gain greater support for the company (Drope and Hansen, 2006). Specialized approaches have not yet been developed.

### 4.3 Interim conclusion

The presentation of approaches of the functional-instrumental paradigm has shown the varying relevance assigned to the dimensions in research. The emotional dimension in particular has hardly been considered in PR approaches to date (Holtzhausen, 2002; Van Ruler, 2005; Yeomans, 2007; Zhang and Adegbola, 2022). Although the relevance of the individual dimensions varies greatly in different decision-making contexts, it is surprising that there are barely any findings to date relating to which aspects are relevant and to what extent for many stakeholder decisions. In addition, links between generalizing and specialized approaches and between different specialized approaches are rarely established.

Several propositions can be derived from the foregoing considerations.

- (1) The dimensions of performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal are relevant across all decision-making contexts (e.g., purchase decisions, job choice, and voting decisions), albeit to markedly different degrees.
- (2) The foregoing considerations indicate that the degree of overlap across different stakeholder relationships varies substantially (Figure 1). This observation leads to the second proposition: In the various stakeholder relationships, the overlaps are greatest in the dimension of legitimacy, followed by the dimension of emotional appeal, while the differences dominate in the dimension of performance. Specifically, highly unfair treatment of employees or blatant, deliberate environmental pollution is likely to influence the decisions of all stakeholders. As a brand with strong emotional appeal, Apple may also benefit from its product brand in the context of employer branding, although the employer brand would need to be further developed in terms of emotional appeal. The differences are most pronounced in the performance dimension: even the highest scores in legitimacy and emotional appeal are of little value if the company offers extremely low salaries and provides no career opportunities.
- (3) The established distinction between affective and cognitive involvement (Kim and Sung, 2009) leads to the third



- proposition: The higher the affective involvement, the more important the emotional appeal dimension of an organization is for the decision. And correspondingly: The higher the cognitive involvement, the more important the performance dimension of an organization is for the decision.
- (4) With regard to the dimension of legitimacy, Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) argue that fundamental expectations must be met here. Using motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg et al., 1959; Lacey et al., 2015), a fourth proposition can be formulated: The dimension of legitimacy is more of a hygiene factor and less of a motivator than the performance dimension and the dimension of emotional appeal.

These propositions yield direct implications for empirical research. The relevance of the individual dimensions has been examined—at least implicitly, though often unsystematically—across several decision-making contexts, including product purchases (Knez et al., 2014), stock purchases (Hoffmann and Fieseler, 2012; Hoffmann et al., 2018), and job choice (Purohit et al., 2021). The propositions advanced here suggest that developing a set of items applicable across decision-making contexts would be a promising avenue for future research, at least for the dimensions of emotional appeal and legitimacy. Initial steps in this direction have been taken by Schwaiger (2004). By contrast, a uniform set of items does not appear feasible for the performance dimension. Performance is not only evaluated very differently across functional systems such as business, politics, science, sports, or the media

(Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008); even within a single context such as purchasing decisions, the substantial variation in product- and service-specific benefits and attributes indicates the need for context-specific item sets.

## 5 Critical paradigm

A clear minority of PR and strategic communication research approaches follow different critical theory approaches (Trujillo and Toth, 1987). They understand organizations as ideological arenas for power, influence, and control. They are therefore primarily interested in the political aspects of how organizations use strategic communication to secure their hegemonic power (Habermas, 1989; Motion and Weaver, 2005). Basically, it can be stated that strategic communication helps to reinforce existing hierarchies in each of the three dimensions. In the following, the connectivity of the triad of performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal will be demonstrated by assigning examples of discourses of the critical paradigm to the various dimensions. The potential of the dimensions for the critical paradigm is shown, among other things, in dystopian societal scenarios in which an extreme manifestation of a dimension has occurred in the strategic communications of a society (Table 3). Such an extreme manifestation occurs when either (a) one dimension, such as performance, dominates while the other dimensions are minimally expressed, or (b) one dimension is entirely absent or only very weakly represented. This can also be broken down below the societal level for societal subsystems, individual markets, or a single organization.

In the *dimension of performance*, the rationality of purpose is based on how efficiently or effectively a product or organization solves a problem. This leads to the widespread practice, particularly in strategic communication for product innovations, of first emphasizing the relevance of the problem to be solved. This leads to a central accusation of critical research: artificial needs are created in order to sell superfluous products (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972; Williamson, 1979).

What scenarios can a barely pronounced or dominant performance orientation lead to? If performance plays no role in strategic communication, there is a risk of stagnation and a lack of ambition. An example of this is an election campaign in which the parties neither name the country's central problems nor propose solutions. This leads to the self-abandonment of politics and, thus, to a *failed society*. This can be transferred to markets in which customers are only acquired on the basis of legitimacy and emotional appeal, while products and services are no longer developed further. A dominant focus on performance and neglect of the other two dimensions, on the other hand, can lead to a *pure meritocracy*.

The *dimension of legitimacy* includes discourses according to which strategic communication reinforces existing power structures (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972; Habermas, 1989; Ramsey, 2015) and thus disadvantages minorities (Johnston, 2015). An extensive neglect of the dimension of legitimacy thus propagates the image of an *ego-society*. Conversely, an excessive emphasis on legitimacy can propagate the image of an *all-responsible welfare*

*society* in which companies have to justify the profits they make (Rand, 1957).

In the *dimension of emotional appeal*, Habermas' (1985) validity claim of subjective truthfulness leads to discourses of deception and manipulation (Packard, 1957; Dulek and Campbell, 2015; Edwards, 2021). While this is concerned not with truth, but with the subjective impression of truthfulness, the dimension of emotional appeal focuses on authenticity and emotional uniqueness. A complete neglect of emotional appeal can lead to a completely *sober and emotionless society*. A focus on emotional appeal, on the other hand, leads to an over-emotionalized society in which the truth is largely irrelevant. This would lead to a *post-truth society* (Harsin, 2018; Thompson, 2020).

The table thus shows once again the potential of Habermas' three dimensions, which have rarely been applied in critical research, although Habermas himself is primarily assigned to the critical paradigm (Burkart, 2004; Weaver et al., 2006). While the table illustrates the dystopian scenarios or societal risks of extreme manifestations in the dimensions, it can also be applied to organizations. The dystopian scenarios then become strategies for how organizations can use the triad of dimensions to steer away from weaknesses in one dimension by drawing attention to strengths in another dimension.

## 6 Discussion

In the paper, the relevance and potential of the triad of performance, legitimacy and emotional appeal for strategic communication research were worked out. The starting point for these considerations was Habermas' (1985) three-world concept, which he developed on the basis of Popper (1972, 1979) and Weber (2019) and which Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) further developed with their reputation theory for strategic communication research. In contrast to Habermas (1985) and Eisenegger and Imhof (2008), the paper focuses on (a) perceived and (b) decision-related performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal. For the interpretative paradigm, the foundations of the dimensions of performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal have been elaborated. The relevance of perceived performance, legitimacy and emotional appeal for the individual and social construction of reality and meaning has become clear. It has also been shown to what varying degrees criteria in the dimensions are institutionalized and changeable and what role strategic communication plays in this. The added value of describing aspects of strategic communication and its social construction not in isolation for one dimension, but jointly and comparatively for the three dimensions has already been demonstrated here.

Subsequently, approaches have been explained for the functional-instrumental paradigm that specialize in processing a dimension either for the entire organization (e.g., public relations) or for a decision-making context (e.g., cause-related marketing, emotional branding). It has become clear that the overlaps between the various stakeholder relationships are greatest in the dimension of legitimacy, followed by the dimension of emotional appeal, while the differences dominate in the dimension of performance. Finally, dystopian societal scenarios have been developed for the critical

TABLE 3 Dystopian scenarios of strategic communication in the dimensions.

	Dimension of performance	Dimension of legitimacy	Dimension of emotional appeal
<b>Dominance of one dimension</b>	<b>Pure meritocracy:</b> dominance of success and performance arguments with simultaneous neglect of the other two dimensions	<b>All-responsible welfare society:</b> propagation of the primacy of legitimacy with simultaneous neglect of performance dimensions in particular	<b>Post-truth-society:</b> dominance of emotions with simultaneous irrelevance of truth
<b>(Extensive) absence of a dimension</b>	<b>Failed society:</b> irrelevance of success, performance and innovation	<b>Ego-society:</b> irrelevance of respect and compliance with norms	<b>Sober society:</b> propagation of the primacy of rational discourse

paradigm, in which an extreme manifestation of a dimension in the strategic communications of a society has occurred.

In this paper, the dimensions were concretized using the example of companies. However, as Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) have already made clear, the three dimensions can easily be transferred to other social fields such as politics or science. For example, Hoffjann et al. (2023) applied the three dimensions proposed by Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) to examine both the self-perception of spokespersons and the external perception of journalists, thereby operationalizing Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma. They surveyed attitudes toward credibility, the attractiveness of the profession, and performance, adopting a broader approach than existing stigma scales.

The descriptions of the three paradigms of strategic communication research have, on the one hand, revealed numerous points of contact with existing research. The three dimensions in themselves are (naturally) well known in research. On the other hand, the paper has shown numerous potentials of the triad of performance, legitimacy, and emotional appeal. If, for example, functional-instrumental research has shown that many decisions are influenced by emotional appeal, but this is largely ignored in the corresponding research, a relevant gap has been identified. In addition, it has been shown that although all three paradigms discuss all dimensions in different characteristics, this is (too) rarely done in context and comparatively. All too often, an analysis, description, or concept focuses on one dimension while ignoring the others. There is therefore a need, particularly in functional-instrumental research, for approaches that identify conflicts between the dimensions and develop potential interfaces. This has been elaborated in the context of the interpretative paradigm.

The triad of performance, legitimacy and emotional appeal thus offers a framework for strategic communication research in order to contextualize its sometimes extremely specific questions and point out cross-connections. In this way, the centrifugal forces that arise from the increasingly specialized and differentiated strategic communication research can be contained somewhat at least. Descriptions that build on the explanations of the interpretative paradigm and further develop the relevance and development of the three dimensions in terms of communication theory, organizational theory, and social theory appear relevant for theory development. Such theoretical work can build on some of the preliminary work mentioned above (Habermas, 1985; Imhof, 2006; e.g., Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008).

If it has been established that the three dimensions influence decisions to varying degrees, the task for empirical research and market research in communication practice is to investigate their relevance for different decision-making contexts. The prerequisite for this is the development of differentiated, appropriate scales, which is still in its early stages. Only a few existing studies on reputation (e.g., Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004; Schwaiger, 2004; Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007) can serve as a basis. More specifically, fairly concrete suggestions for corresponding items can be derived for the dimensions of legitimacy and emotional appeal. For the performance dimension, by contrast, existing studies on decision-making factors provide only initial indications of relevant items, which may need to be further elaborated through qualitative research. There are some exceptions, however, in the form of studies that have operationalized the three dimensions using a single item each. The example of the study on the stigmatization of press spokespeople (Hoffjann et al., 2023) demonstrates that the scale must be at least partially adapted to the subjects under investigation: "The work of spokespersons provides an overview (no overview) of the interests of organizations," "Spokespersons are (not) credible," and "Spokesperson is an (un)attractive profession."

Such a scale is a prerequisite for generating findings that are relevant to communication practice, including insights into how the dimensions should be considered in the planning of communication projects. For, as much as the dimensions have already been taken into account in many places, this appears to happen by chance and without reliable findings. The application of three-world concept is therefore an example of how a scientific concept can be a helpful tool for communication practice.

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