

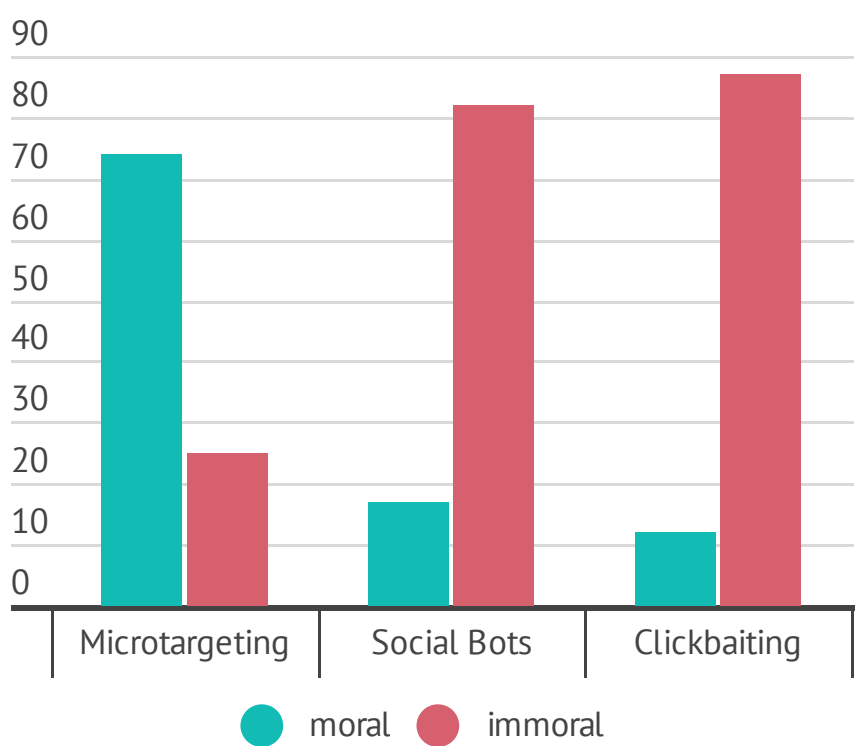
# ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Findings from an online survey among German communication professionals

## ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT AND PR

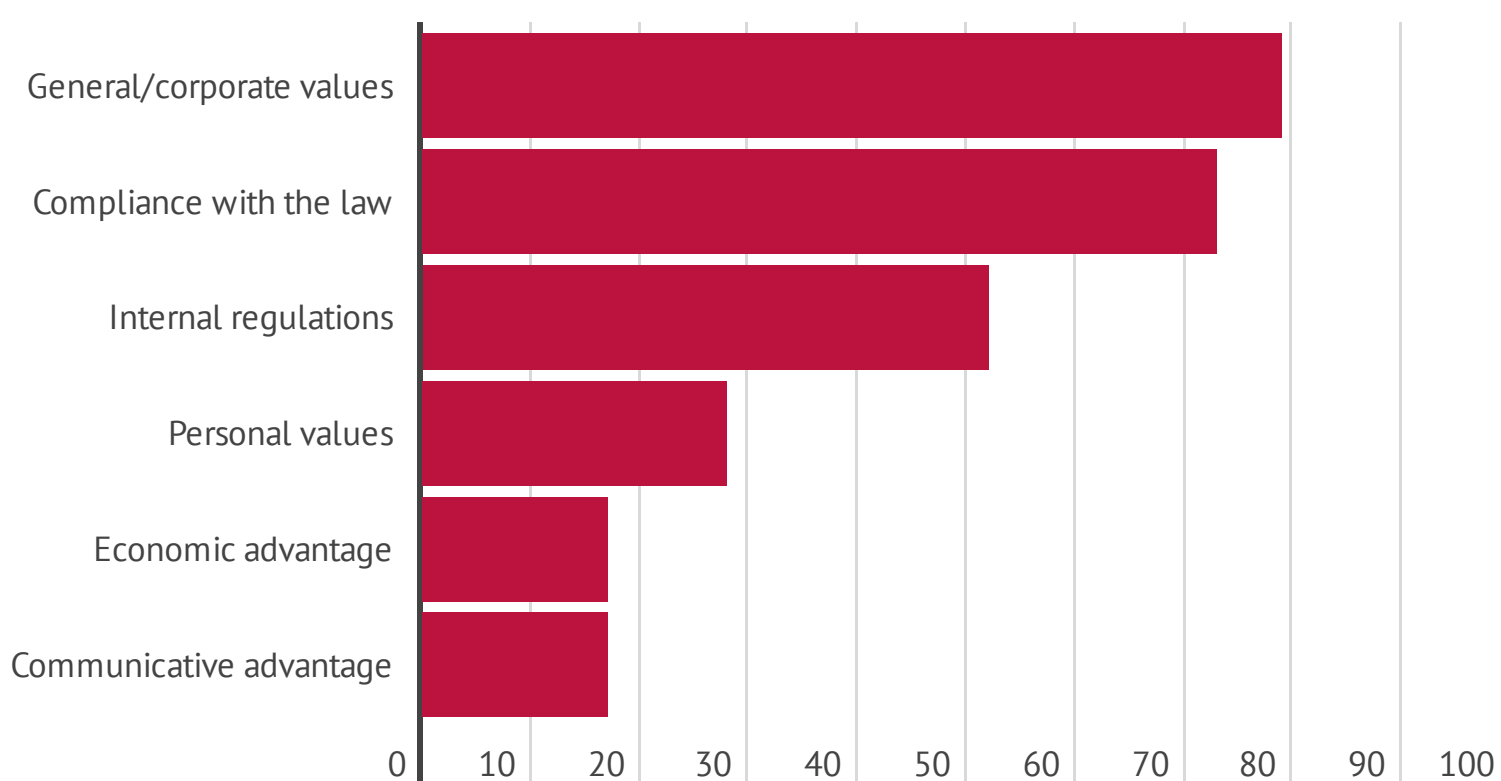
Social media and digital applications are increasingly causing uncertainty among communication managers. As an annual study among European communication managers reveals, the perception of ethical challenges has increased significantly in recent years, which is mainly related to digital communication practices (European Communication Monitor 2020). This concerns, for example, the use of social bots, the collaboration with influencers or the collection and analysis of personalised data. This study provides information on how communication managers evaluate current ethical dilemmas and how they deal with them.

## EVALUATION OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES



The communication managers surveyed consider the purchase of high click numbers through social bots and the use of misleading headlines (clickbaiting) to be predominantly immoral. The collection and use of private data in the course of personalised advertising (microtargeting), on the other hand, is considered moral by the majority. While deceptive practices in the digital space are rejected, the violation of privacy through data use seems less reprehensible.

## DEALING WITH ETHICAL CHALLENGES: DECISION-MAKING IN DILEMMA-SITUATIONS



**Research question: What is most important to communication managers when making a judgement in dilemma situations?**

When communication managers encounter ethical dilemma situations in their jobs, they usually have to live up to different expectations and make difficult decisions. Respondents in this study primarily weigh up whether their actions are in line with **general and corporate values**. They also attach great importance to complying with **applicable laws** and **internal regulations**. Less relevant, however, are their own values or economic aspects. Accordingly, communication managers attribute an **orientation function** to their **employers** and are willing to act in accordance with corporate values and guidelines.

## DEFICIENCIES IN ORGANISATIONS: LACK OF CODES OF ETHICS AND TRAININGS



Corporate values and guidelines are communicated to organisational members such as communication managers through daily interactions, but also through written rules and guidelines. However, as the available data show, organisations have so far missed their chance to communicate binding norms. Only **one-third** of respondents have a **communications-specific code of ethics** to fall back on, and not even **one-fifth** have ever participated in **internal or external ethics training**. This discrepancy between communication managers' desire for orientation and the lack of offerings should be minimised.

● Attended internal or external ethics training  
● Never attended a training

## ABOUT THE STUDY

The study "Ethical Dilemmas in Digital Communication" was conducted at the Chair of Strategic Communication at the University of Leipzig (Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfaß) under the project management of Jeanne Link. The study comprised an online survey among German communication managers ( $n = 118$ ) in October 2020. The survey was based on an experimental design and included the presentation of various dilemma scenarios. In addition, information on the personal and professional background of the respondents was collected.

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