Lighting Up the Black Box – Digital Transformation in German Lobbying

Kathrin Barabara Stürmer
Department of Marketing & International Business, Munster Technological University, Cork, Ireland, kathrin.stuermer@mycit.ie

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Lighting Up the Black Box –
Digital Transformation in German Lobbying

Kathrin Barbara Stürmer

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

Department:
Marketing and International Business

Supervisors:
Dr Pio Fenton, Munster Technological University, Ireland
Dr Gearoid O’Suilleabhain, Munster Technological University, Ireland
Prof Dr Lars Rademacher, Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Submitted to Munster Technological University, Ireland (June 2021)
Declaration

I, Kathrin Barbara Stürmer, hereby declare that the thesis titled “Lighting Up the Black Box – Digital Transformation in German Lobbying” is entirely my own work except where otherwise accredited.

My research has complied with the Institute’s Code of Good Practice in Research and the thesis has not been submitted for an award at any other institution.

Signature
Kathrin Barbara Stürmer

September 20th 2021
Date

Signature
Dr Pio Fenton

Signature
Dr Gearoid O’Suilleabhain

Signature
Prof Dr Lars Rademacher
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Berlin, September 2021
Kathrin Stürmer
Abstract

Digital transformation, alongside social media channels, influences policymaking. The aim of this research is to build knowledge of the consequences of digital transformation on lobbying at German federal level. This analysis uncovers how digital lobbying works in Germany and how it changes classic communication within the political sphere. Taking a grounded theory approach, the study addresses both communicating sides: lobbyists, on the one hand, and members of the German Bundestag and their employees, on the other. A profound understanding of, and differentiation between, lobbying and digital lobbying is gained through a first data-gathering step of 15 interviews with representatives of both the political and lobbying sides. The study extends previous analyses by supplementing the findings with ethnographic data from the researcher’s experience of working as an employee of a member of the German Bundestag. Final conclusions were drawn by presenting these results in the second data-gathering step, during which four (digital) focus groups were held on the political side and three with agency, association, and corporate lobbyists from Berlin. The analysis uncovers a power shift in lobbying communication and a novel communication direction. To better understand capabilities and requirements in this new setting, a process model of lobbying and digital lobbying was designed. These empirical findings have important implications for the understanding of how the public becomes involved in digital lobbying and how both perspectives create knowledge of the future process of lobbying.

Key Words: future of lobbying, digital lobbying, lobbying powershift, lobbying process model, two perspectives, grounded theory methodology
Publications Derived from this Thesis


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Abbreviations

- Digital Focus Group: DFG
- European Union: EU
- European Communication Monitor: ECM
- Focus Group: FG
- Governmental Relations: GR
- Grounded Theory: GT
- Grounded Theory Methodology: GTM
- Member of Parliament (German Bundestag): MP
- Public Affairs: PA
- Public Relations: PR
- Research Questions: RQs
1 Introduction and Background

Digital transformation has arrived in all sectors of today’s life, affecting the core of society (Conroy & Vaughn, 2018; Wallner, 2017). The internet and the social web have fundamentally changed communication environments and individual demands. The ways in which society, organizations, and individuals communicate with stakeholders, and stakeholders communicate with society, organizations, and individuals, are undergoing rapid change (Ammer, 2017, p. 107). New tools, channels, platforms, and strategies are being used to obtain, produce, and share knowledge and are therefore extremely important for communication and interaction today (Lindgren, 2017). Latest research speaks of digital transformation as a continuous process that touches several levels of communication which are (Pleil & Helferich, 2020, pp. 1, 2):

- The social level, here changes through digital transformation entail participation,
- The corporate level, where digital transformation shapes corporate cultural changes and
- The communication function itself, where digital transformation leads to new strategies and processes.

These changes happen constantly, and it is also important to recognise that the use of digital media in “any society, group, or individual will simultaneously have elements of digitally analogue, digitally enhanced, as well as digitally transformative outcomes” (Lindgren, 2017, p. 295). Communication science, therefore, places a number of subjects, structures, and processes resulting from digital transformation within its field, including mass communication, digital strategies, and social media (Scheufele, 2020, p. 2), as investigated in this study.

Digital developments result in increasing information flow and a rising number of communication channels, which, again, bring new challenges and opportunities to communication (Katzenbach, 2018; Sargut & McGrath, 2011). For institutionalised activities such as communication between political and non-political actors, in particular, it is of the utmost importance to know the effect of digital transformation in order to remain influential (Baxter, 2017). Lobby organizations as well as the political sphere need to understand how these new digital processes and tools function, how they
affect both communicating sides, and how digital communication can be added to the toolbox to ensure successful lobbying in times of digital transformation.

The problem addressed by this thesis is that lobbyists as well as policymakers face changes – challenges and opportunities – in communicating with and influencing each other in times of digital transformation particularly given the ubiquity of social media. To address these subjects, this study looks more closely at both communicating sides through a grounded theory (GT) approach to further examine digital lobbying. Thereby, the thesis contributes to the research field of lobbying by mainly complementing to strategic communication research at the intersection of political communication research.

The purpose of this thesis is to answer the following research questions (RQs) by studying the context of the German federal level:

1. In what ways do policymakers and lobbyists relate to each other?
2. How does digital transformation, and social media in particular, affect lobbying?
3. What characterises digital lobbying, and how do classic lobbying and digital lobbying coexist?

1.1 Digital Transformation in Organizations

Digital transformation signifies the use of new, fast, and frequently changing digital technologies (Gimpel & Röglinger, 2015) that affects society as a whole (Schallmo & Tidd, 2021). In an internet context, digital transformation is also interpreted as “digital networked structures and processes” (Kirf et al., 2020, p. 2) that have become especially relevant to organizations by opening new networking and cooperation possibilities (Schallmo & Tidd, 2021). Theorists have established that digital transformation brings structural changes for nearly every sector (Bengler & Schmauder, 2016, p. 75). Thus, academia has paid close attention to the “question of the digital transformation’s relevance for communications practice” (Klewes et al., 2017, p. 10) during the past decade. The largest European survey of strategic communication experts in organizations found that dealing with “the ever-growing information flow, the need to address ever more audiences as well as building and maintaining trust are expected to
be important issues” (Zerfass et al., 2017, p. 53) and will likely become even more important in the future. The figure below demonstrates that “coping with the digital evolution and the social web” (Zerfass et al., 2017, p. 53) is the most relevant changing factor cited in the 2017 European Communication Monitor (ECM). On the question of the most important strategic issues for communication management, until 2020 digital transformation (here understood as evolution) and the social web account for more than 40% such issues and represents the most important category.

![Graph of Most Important Strategic Issues for Communication Management by 2020](communicationmonitor.eu)

Furthermore, in 2019, the ECM “shed[…] light on five pressing issues for communication leaders: trust, transparency, advocacy, content strategies, and emerging technologies” (Zerfass et al., 2019, p. 6). Thus, “coping with the digital evolution and social web” had become less important (5th place) while “building and maintaining trust” was seen as the most difficult challenge, followed by “dealing with the speed and volume of information flow” (Zerfass et al., 2019) by 2022.
“Building and maintaining trust” continues to be the leading issue in the just published ECM of 2021 (Zerfass et al., 2021, p. 72) which means that trust is expected to continue to dominate the agenda of the profession until 2024:
Digital communication channels are increasingly used by public affairs (PA) practitioners and political stakeholders (Fleisher, 2012, p. 7). Consequently, reaching politicians and their employees has never been faster, more dialogic, personalised, or easier for any organization (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2012). As new digital strategies become more important as means of contacting political stakeholders (Meier & Blum, 2020, p. 15), the theoretical and practical importance of further analysis of social media communication in the context of lobbying processes also increases (Krebber et al., 2016). Although there is a wide range of scholarship on the digital communication undertaken by NGOs and non-profit organizations (Klauß, 2014; Rademacher & Remus, 2016), little research has been carried out on the effect of social media and digital transformation on classic lobbying by agencies, companies, or law firms (Fleisher, 2012; Köppl, 2017). Consequently, this study looks more closely at the consequences of digital communication channels for lobbying actors.

1.2 Digital Transformation in Society

For years, academia has analysed the field of society. Thereby society is taken to be a structure of meaningful norms, rules, and ideas, to interpret notions of what is right or what should be avoided. Society can also determine active action, with consequences for the public discourse of individuals and groups (Zerfaß & Dühring, 2014). Communicative action in terms of civil discourse as well as the diversity of voices belong into the public sphere (Kruse et al., 2018). This network where “private people come together as a public” (Habermas, 1989, p.27) to discuss information and knowledge between society and a state, requires the absence of institutions (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 2). In the absence of institutional influence, the “public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion” (Habermas, 2004, p. 351). Thus, the public sphere is classically known for three functions (Neidhardt, 1994, pp. 8, 9):

- Transparency: openness to collectively significant issues and opinions
- Validation: aims at a discursive handling of such topics and arguments
- Orientation: forming a convincing public opinion

The public opinion is represented through the concept of public interest in form as a guidepost (Napoli, 2019, p. 132). On behalf of the broader public the common good
perspective is put above individual interests. Hence, communication scholars argue that “public communication lies at the heart of democratic process [where] citizens require” (Garnham, 2004, p. 357). Latest research therefore asks, how the concept of public interest is represented in the context of social media (Kruse, et al., 2017; Napoli, 2019), especially in terms the public sphere that is also interpreted as “disrupted” in “interaction with and beyond the traditional media” (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). It is the internet and social media – understood as “digital networked communication tools” – that have marked society in terms of the public sphere’s functions (Lindgren, 2017, p. 4).

Rapid change derives from communication triggered by the emergence of new technological infrastructures (e.g., networks, computer hardware) and applications (e.g., apps on smartphones, web applications, social media) (Gimpel & Röglinger, 2015). “Digital society”, “information society”, “post-industrial society”, and “network society” are only some examples of the many names for this phase (Lindgren, 2017, p. 4). Regardless of the name adopted, it is society that reflects digital transformation in several elements and steps.

Digital ways of communicating put established notions of the public sphere to the test (Klinger, 2018). Klinger examines whether those involved in, for example, a hashtag can be understood as (a partial) part of society, or “semi-public” (2018, p. 195). According to the author, social media and political mobilization through social media in particular are linked to a real-life context. The following two figures (contrasting 2009 and 2019) indicate the rising number of digital tools and channels for public and semi-public communication.
Thus far, it is clear that transformation in the public sphere is closely connected to digital communication. Scholars see in the current state of research an ambivalent picture of analysed changes. On the one hand, receiving political information and
participating politically and socially has not decreased due to the internet, as earlier predictions assumed (Emmer, 2019b, p. 52; Vowe et al., 2007). On the other, the expected evidence of the positive effects of a new era of participatory democracy is still seen as limited (Emmer, 2019b, p. 52).

Looking more closely, in terms of this thesis two aspects of research stood out: digital social interaction and digital political engagement in society. Digital communication technologies expanded opportunities for social interactions so that information and technology have grown in prominence (Selwyn, 2004). For political engagement as well, communication technologies have allowed individuals to activate their loosely tied social networks so that diverse mobilization becomes more personalized (Bennett, 2012, p. 21). Since social interaction form an important element to the information age policy agenda in technologically advanced landscapes, many specific cases are studied from psychological and health perspectives in terms of well-being and also from educational and teaching perspectives in terms of digital learning. For communication sciences and political means, the core questions concern who is “interacting” with whom. Based on the German sociologist Max Weber „[a]ction is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Weber, 1978, p. 4). Thus, actions and re-actions are based on individual engagements. More precisely, Barrett and Zani explain political engagement as to denote the engagement of individuals with political institutions, processes, and decision-making (Barrett & Zani, 2014).

It is possible to communicate in the form of simple engagement up to citizen mobilization. In relation to political participation, US scholars even found that digital media enable communication to reach local through supranational levels (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). Scholars believe that this form of participation can be seen as the opposite of one-dimensional – which stands for only one communication pair of two people – since participation encompasses a range of activities and is therefore understood as multidimensional – more communication pairs (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014). This new form of public political participation brings different “conditions for and circumstances of political participation” (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017, p. 1). Scholars name the place where these developments and activities occur an “electronic republic” or “digital agora” (Bang, 2005). In such sites of political engagement, “opinions can be expressed, understandings gained, alliances built, and influence
exerted vertically and, potentially, horizontally” (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017, p. 1), which offers a society many opportunities.

Previous research proves curiosity about, and the importance of, how digital technologies offer new opportunities to the public (Vowe et al., 2007). Nitschke and Donges point out the key change, the public, saying that the difference is „a set of platforms and communication modes that an organization employs to communicate with the greater public on the web“ (Nitschke & Donges, 2018, p. 305). In communication science, the public sphere has long been associated with the media public sphere, since it traditionally deals with journalistic and mass-media mediated communication (Raupp, 2021). Within the environment of digital transformation, the media are indispensable – now more than ever to the public – and, taken as a single entity, represent a major player that can provoke greater participation and public interest (Friedrichsen, 2015b, p. 10). To better understand these new forms of political participation by society through social media, analysis of the political side is also required.

1.3 Digital Transformation in Politics

The interplay between politics, communication, and media has been an important research topic for academics (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Deutsch (1963) described politics as communication and the “process of government as a process of control” (p. 255) based on “internal and external communication” (Lang, 2007). Political communication is also understood as “precondition of democracy” and connects society and media to the political framework (Esser, 2013, p. 155). As media and digital developments become an ever-growing challenge for society, science sees policymakers as more required than ever to create an appropriate adaption of the political frame for society (Diederich, 2015, p. 163). In the digital era, media and mediated communications are of central relevance for politics, political institutions, political actors, and society and its individual citizens (Esser, 2013, p. 155). It is therefore of the utmost importance to further analyse this development and its primary consequences.

The latest research shows that political institutions increasingly use social media channels to communicate with their citizens (Dubois & Martin-Bariteau, 2020). German scholars argue that the distance politics has kept between creating rules and the public is
now being reinterpreted (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2017). Through digital transformation, anyone who had been carefully kept at a certain distance from policymakers previously (or vice versa) is now able to get very close. The authors explain that technological development transforms interpersonal communication into a more complex act (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2017). Others, on the other hand, argue that communication becomes less complex as communication possibilities expand between former geographically unconnected units (Kneidinger-Müller, 2018, p. 160). Both perspectives support a third view, whereby digital politics offer a chance to realise democratic ideals in terms of “collective participatory and semi-deliberative decision making” (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017, p. 1). Indeed, social media is very important for numerous international social movements (Brown, 2016, p. 302) and can constrain but also enable new forms of political advocacy (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2019). Yet, in 2016, a key study in Germany of digital campaigning among non-profit organizations stated that a “number of politicians and ministry officials do not even have social media accounts” (Krebber et al., 2016, p. 114). This valuation, however, is no longer applicable: By December 2020, 95.9% of the Members of the German Bundestag (MPs) used at least Facebook as a social media channel.

![MPs' Social Media Accounts in Dec 2020](Image)

*Figure 6: MPs’ Social Media Accounts in 12/2020 (Source: Author).*
Most MPs even have more than one account:

![Number of Social Media Accounts per MP](image)

*Figure 7: Number of Social Media Accounts per MP (Source: Author).*

Clearly, digital transformation brings tools, channels, platforms, and strategies which are used to obtain, produce, and share knowledge. Hoecker (2002) discusses democracy via the internet and summarizes three functions that political actors now have: an information function, an interaction function and a participation function for society. This process is extremely important for political communication, especially the interaction of society and politics (Lindgren, 2017). Thus, digital channels are in increasing use among political stakeholders as well as Public Affairs (PA) practitioners (Fleisher, 2012, p. 7). However, scholars also identify that use of such channels exerts pressure and has implications for the overall political structure in terms of political levels, political process and communication itself (Henn & Frieß, 2016, p. 11). In order to better understand the weight of these developments and the consequences of change in political communication (Rhodes et al., 2008), the next section looks more closely at digital transformation in lobbying.

### 1.4 Digital Transformation in Lobbying

In this thesis, lobbying is understood as a two-way communication process (Milbrath, 1960). Communication is classically defined as “an act […] to answer the following questions: Who – Says What – In Which Channel – To Whom – With What Effect?” (Lasswell, 1948, p. 37), which forms the basis for lobbying. The Lasswell formula (Sapienza et al., 2015) creates the foundation for an encompassing definition in this
thesis that is enriched by further descriptive aspects (De Bruycker, 2016b; Joos, 1998; Schulz, 2009) since there is no generally accepted definition of lobbying in either political debate or academic discussion. Lobbying is therefore to be understood as a communication process between lobbyists and policymakers where information is traded via communication channels. On the one hand, the objective is to convince decision-makers concerning a policymaking process on behalf of individual interests while, on the other, the objective is to achieve practical consulting concerning the implementation of legislation by the concerned party on behalf of a common interest.

Lobbying is traditionally understood as a rather private, non-mediatised representation of interests to convince political decisionmakers (Joos, 2016; Kleinfeld et al., 2007; Krebber et al., 2016; Weiler & Brändli, 2015). Nevertheless, public media-mediated communication processes with the same objective must also be included (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019; Filzmaier & Fähnrich, 2014). Scholars also state that in a digital setting, the objective of convincing a policymaker about individual interests or a policymaking process continues to be the same (Krebber et al., 2015) as “the assertion of interests is attempted to be realised through communicative influence” (Krebber et al., 2015, p. 292) but includes “a stronger public presence” (Einspänner, 2010, p. 20). Research has shown that academic studies on lobbying strategies are outmoded and need to be updated in terms of tactics and tools to encompass not only phone calls and email but concrete advances in technology and web applications such as social media (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016, p. 5). Even though some sources conclude that “emails, websites, and other technological developments are no substitute for old-fashioned face-to-face contact” (Watson & Shackleton, 2008, p. 107), latest research proves that “networked media can afford […] real-time, semi-private direct communication with decision makers” (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2019, p. 1) as a new form of lobbying.

Against the background of technological change, increasing information flow, and a rising number of social media channels, there is no doubt that new challenges and opportunities have arisen for communication between policymakers and lobbyists (Baxter, 2017; Katzenbach, 2018; Sargut & McGrath, 2011, p. 68). Although there is a wide range of scholarship on digital communication by NGOs and organizations (Klauß, 2014; Rademacher & Remus, 2016), little research has been carried out
regarding the effect of social media and digital transformation on classic lobbying by agencies, companies, or law firms (Fleisher, 2012; Köppl, 2017). As new digital strategies become more important for addressing political stakeholders (Raupp, 2021), the theoretical and practical importance of further analysis of social media communication in the context of lobbying processes increases.

1.5 Challenges for Lobbying Research

Lobbying research has grown in previous years, especially in terms of depth and cohesion, through interdisciplinary approaches and more empirical research in the field. The so-called “lobbying black box” – which can be understood as a lack of theoretical sophistication and insufficient insights that result in contradictory findings (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2015; Klüver, 2013; Klüver & Saurugger, 2013) – has been the subject of a sustained and substantial amount of dedicated lobbying research on different political levels, in several disciplines, and from different perspectives. Thereby, the professionalization of the discipline has gained more acceptance in practice as well as in empirical research (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013). Research on lobbying in the fields of communications science and media science remains burdensome in terms of academic analysis due to the difficulties in collecting data about direct communications between lobbyists and policymakers (Hielscher, 2017). Several blind spots have been noticed in systematic analyses in the form of academic studies or practical handbooks because lobbying is often only analysed on a broad level (Nothhaft, 2017, p. 27). Shortcomings also occur since “assertions are based on case studies focusing only on a small number of interest groups, which makes it difficult to draw general conclusions” (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013, p. 185). Even if more actors and different perspectives are included in the approach to lobbying, criticisms have also been made that specific details are not analysed (Bernhagen et al., 2015). Few scholars have scientifically addressed the question of what lobbyists actually do (Nothhaft, 2017, p. 17) and even fewer have actually been able to answer it as the relevant information is both sensitive and generally not in the public domain (McGrath, 2005). An older formulation therefore still holds true until today (Stanbury, 1988, p. 305):
“Writing authoritatively about lobbying is as difficult as writing authoritatively about the practice of espionage. Anyone who has any relevant current information is likely not to be writing about it but practicing it, yet will not tell you how, or with what success.”

In Germany, in particular, where no official transparency register existed (until 03/2021, effectively from 01/2022 on), these difficulties result in lack of information. Many negative prejudices and false beliefs among researchers, communication practitioners, and the public have resulted, and lobbying and its theoretical and practical role in a democratic system have led to much discussion.

On the one hand, pluralism symbolises the foundation of interest representation and lobbying (Klein et al., 2003, p. 2), and larger pluralist enterprises believe that lobbying is a benign operation, consisting largely of “providing information to elected officials”, which is supportive of democratic governments (Lowery, 2007, p. 31). However, even though lobbying is theoretically seen as a valid public response to policy conflicts and thus a support to democracy (Lösche, 2006), it is also connotated very negatively in terms of the non-transparency of the practice itself (Gammelin & Hamann, 2005; Gammelin & Löw, 2014). The debate around “inevitably corrupting influences on the links between citizens and government within democratic systems” (Lowery, 2007, p. 31) suggests very critical associations. It is therefore no surprise that academics have observed that “the word lobbying has seldom been used the same way twice by those studying the topic” (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, p. 33). Hence, more clarification is needed, especially regarding prejudices, basic knowledge, beliefs, and myths regarding both the term and the business.

Given the changing conditions for lobbying due to digital transformation and social media use, further research is very important, especially as regards the recurring digital black box. Early research on digital lobbying was very enthusiastic, classifying “Digital Public Affairs” or “lobbying in the virtual world” (Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013, p. 52) as an enriching and revolutionising “young discipline” that shed more light on the practice (Thimm & Einspänner, 2012, p. 185). Scholars also stress that research has only just started to analyse digital strategies and in-field practices and can, therefore, only offer preliminary findings (Krebber et al., 2015, p. 308). Hence, more studies are clearly necessary to understand techniques, political and lobby perspectives, and their
interplay within this novel field. In both practice and theory, it is as yet unclear how classic lobbying and digital lobbying coexist, for example. Further questions concern whether certain functionalities overlap and whether new strategies are used and the extent to which they replace older tactics in lobbying communication.

Hence, this thesis tries to reflect the relevant points in the sense of strategy, condition, setting and consequence in the best way possible, taking a dual perspective while following the highest academic standards. Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasise that (digital) lobbying cannot be entirely described from a merely rational or single theoretical point of view. Contextual factors and individual perspectives are crucial in understanding how interest groups and individuals lobby, especially in a digital setting. Therefore, the next section presents the overall structure, including the concrete RQs, aim, and methodology in order to tackle this research gap.

1.6 Structure: Research Questions, Aim and Methodology

To unveil novel aspects of lobbying communication processes in a digital setting, an analysis of digital lobbying through empirical evidence is necessary. These findings will generate knowledge enabling an understanding of how digital tools function, how the other communicative side works, and how digital communication can be added to the toolbox. The concrete aim of this thesis is to develop a process model that can explain the effect of digital transformation, and social media use in particular, on lobbying. For lobbyists as well as the political sphere, these results will give important insights for successful lobbying in times of digital transformation and social media use. Therefore, two main data-gathering rounds were conducted to generate the knowledge required to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ 1**: In what ways do policymakers and lobbyists relate to each other?
- **RQ 2**: How does digital transformation, and social media in particular, affect lobbying?
- **RQ 3**: What characterises digital lobbying, and how do classic lobbying and digital lobbying coexist?
This qualitative study presents a grounded theory methodology (GTM) approach, including ethnographic aspects. To explore unknown changes through digital transformation and the future of lobbying, the perspectives of both lobbyists in Berlin, Germany and members of the German Bundestag (MPs) and their employees, are considered. Consequently, the explorative character of digital changes in German lobbying is analysed through the classical use of qualitative methods (Diekmann, 2011, p. 34), namely guided interviews, focus groups (FGs), and (at specific points) ethnography.

As proposed by GMT, 46 people were selected to be actively involved in interviews and FGs to determine how digital transformation is perceived in lobbying communication. To identify the various processes and the new setting in which classic lobbying finds itself, data from 15 semi-structured interviews were first analysed through qualitative coding cycles and further enriched by the researcher’s own ethnographic notes from experiences working in the German Bundestag. The next step was to identify the impact of digital transformation on the data given by both communicating sides (lobbyists, representing the non-political sphere, and politicians and their staff, representing the political sphere). To this end, the interview findings were presented to seven FGs for verification and further development of first findings.

To respond to the RQs and accomplish the research aim, the thesis is structured into six chapters. This first chapter provides the background and introduction to the subject of research, and the second chapter is a review of the existing literature. These sections also describe theoretical categories, including digital communication and transparency, and introduce the concept of digital lobbying. The literature review starts with a general introduction to strategic communication (Section 2.2), leading to a discussion of lobbying (Section 2.3) and, thereafter, early digital lobbying research (Section 2.4). It concludes with the identified research gaps (Section 2.5) and challenges faced by the political and non-political spheres due to digital transformation. Chapter 3 describes the selected research methodology to answer the RQs. First, an introduction to a qualitative approach is provided (Section 3.2). GTM was the chosen qualitative research methodology. In order to find answers to the RQs, the argument is that an open-minded research approach is required (Section 3.3) because there are no pre-existing studies of digital lobbying theory to be verified. The GTM approach is
described and discussed in detail (Section 3.4) before the individual qualitative methods are explained (Sections 3.5 – 37). The chapter concludes with a precise overview of the research design (Section 3.8). Chapter 4 presents the findings and analysis of the first (Section 4.2) and second (Section 4.3) data-gathering rounds as well as the creation of the final process model (Section 4.4). Chapter 5 discusses the results and answers the RQs (Section 5.2), after which limitations and quality criteria are outlined (Section 5.3). Practical implications are also explored, including the importance of digital skills in a fast-changing time (Section 5.4) before recommendations for further research are given in Chapter 6.
2 Literature Review

To understand the factors relevant to the main RQ, the literature review presents a field mapping of lobbying and digital lobbying. With respect to a changing field in terms of digital transformation, it was important to start the mapping with the determination of the status quo in terms of strategic communication. The further assessment of the field is gained through the division to evaluate the correlation between past research on lobbying and new findings regarding digital transformation and social media.

The emphasis of the current thesis is on changes in lobbying due to digital transformation. Hence, the first sections focus on lobbying and how it works, its goals, used channels, and tools. After the status quo is described, a closer look is taken at changes brought by aspects of the digital transformation of lobbying in areas including society, communication, and politics. In the second part of the chapter, initial changes in the field are presented. More specifically, how digital lobbying emerged, what exactly it means in the current literature, and how it is defined are all addressed. Finally, the literature review concludes with an overall summary of the challenges and opportunities presented and how they affect the aim of the research in order to highlight the research gap.

Therefore, different theoretical foundations and basic assumptions from research and practice are explained. Existing studies, mainly from and on Germany and the European Union (EU), form the basis, as they align with the focus of the thesis. Statistics and studies from US academics will be included. A larger amount of lobbying literature is based on lobbying in the USA (Raknes & Ihlen, 2018, p. 1) as resources are more accessible in a more regulated system (Baxter, 2017; Bergan, 2009; Downes et al., 2017; Mahoney, 2007). However, it is important to bear in mind that lobbying faces different regulations in other political systems than in individual EU Member States (for more information, see Section 2.3.1). Thus, these two contexts cannot be accurately compared (Kentrup et al., 2013, p. 344). The German context belongs to the wider context of the complex political system in the EU, in which individual Member States engage in very dynamic discussions about opinions, strategies, and systems. The subject of this thesis, namely the dynamic digital possibilities for lobbying, is analysed in line with the German political system which is why major parts of the literature review focus on the German context.
2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

Understanding how lobbying works in a digital setting and, especially, how digital communication changes the concept of lobbying is the goal of this thesis. Consequently, this literature review sets up the necessary theoretical understanding of the relevant elements (Randolph, 2009).

The overall structure of the literature review also represents the development of the thesis. What started out as an idea of studying changes in lobbying narrowed down to the concrete aspects of social media and, finally, a focus on digital lobbying literature. Endnote was used as a literature management software to continuously update the latest developments in the literature during the research process.

As a first step, trends and progress in the field of lobbying were identified, as an enormous amount of literature exists. In terms of quality, it was, furthermore, found that different lobbying fields are discussed by different author groups, such as practitioners, critics, scholars, and journalists. Thus, a systematic keyword search in Google Scholar, several journals, and university libraries started in 2018 to handle the huge amount of literature on lobbying. General literature was reviewed at an early stage, after which certain areas of study were identified as more relevant once the main concerns became clearer.

In order to tackle articles with a similar focus, methodology, or goal as concerns the research topic, it is also important to limit the search to papers and books that mention the research terms in the abstract (Randolph, 2009, p. 7). The continuous analyses of articles and books was very important as new keywords and direct sources were found in their bibliographies. Later, methodologies and research techniques were also used as keyword combinations were added to the content in several research gates. Literature was mostly checked in English and in German. With a stable literature foundation, most further studies and books were identified either through bibliographies or concrete recommendations from supervisors or publication reviewers.
The initial literature collection process in 2018 was supplemented by a more focused electronic search in 2019 which used three academic databases/journals: the Journal of European Public Policy, the Journal of Communication Management, and the German Springer database, including international science publications. Previously analysed literature had revealed these databases/journals as more important sources of information for the research focus and, once the focus had been narrowed to digital lobbying, the researcher went back to searching them. A first limit was academic research papers and books that mentioned the research terms directly in the title, while a second was in terms of content, namely relevant purpose, research design/methodology/approach, findings, research limitations/implications, practical implications, social implications, and originality/value. The following are the results in numbers.

**Journal of European Public Policy (peer-reviewed):**
The researcher applied the keyword “lobbying” (369 results) and selected articles published since 2010. A total of 183 articles in the period from 01/2010 – 10/2019 were identified during this search.

**Springer database** (https://link.springer.com):
Application of the keyword “digital lobbying” obtained 192 results published between 2010 and 2020 (many of which had been previously retrieved). Of the 147 results published between 2015 and 2020, only 12 were articles, of which only three were relevant in terms of content. Within political science and international relations, 95 results were obtained, of which 14 were relevant.

**Journal of Communication Management (Double-blind peer review):**
The researcher applied the keywords “lobbying” (more than 9000 results) and “digital lobbying” (one result). It was possible to access 101 documents, of which 47 had been published during the previous 12 months (backdated from September 2019). The total content published during the last year was 732 documents, of which 357 were articles.

In order to explore the results concerning the content of all findings, the following sections present a broad view of literature on (1) strategic communication, (2) lobbying, and (3) digital lobbying.
2.2 Strategic Communication

To thoroughly understand the topic of lobbying, the review starts with strategic communication in general and then zooms in on the specific communication between lobbyists and policymakers. The term “strategic communication” has been defined as an umbrella term to describe “goal-oriented” communicative activities within the disciplines of management, marketing, public relations (PR), technical communication, political communication, and information or social marketing (Thorson, 2013; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 487). These disciplines include different types of organizations, such as corporates, non-profit organizations, and the government. A closer look at these relations shows “how organizations interact with [each other or different parties such as] customers, employees, investors or donors, government officials, and community leaders (including media)” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 27) and thereby clearly relate to lobbying.

Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007), who introduced a first definition of strategic communication in the first issue of the International Journal of Strategic Communication, argue that the term covers the substantial communication required for an entity to survive and sustain its success. The authors understood entities to be corporations, governments, non-profits, social movements, or known public individuals. More than a decade after offering this definition, it is explained that the purpose of communication in general is to engage in conversations regarding an entity’s strategic goal, while “strategic communication as a discipline takes the perspective of the focal organization/entity and its calculus to achieve specific goals by means of communication under conditions of limited resources and uncertainty” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 487). For this thesis, taking the entities’ perspective is crucial, which is why the focal organization is included and the most recent discussion are examined further in Section 2.3.3, “Lobbying Actors”.

Within communication studies, scholars say that “strategic communication offers a conceptual understanding of communication choices and decision-making processes of public affairs professionals in charge of lobbying campaigns” (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 5). It is “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission”
The international and interdisciplinary approach of leading scholars indicates an open but clear research range, especially since strategic processes can be analytically separated into three distinct phases or modes which stand for every communicative level (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 499):

- Strategy formulation and revision;
- Strategy presentation;
- Strategy execution, implementation, and operationalization.

To be more precise, “strategic communication can only flourish as a research field if it has specific research objects and a specific research perspective, along with institutional manifestations […] that create an accumulated body of knowledge” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 488). Therefore, it is close, micro-level analysis that unfolds how specific choices “translate into specific messages and lobbying appeals and how these come to have specific meanings for different publics“ (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 5). It is important to note this fact as it not only includes an emphasis on strategy but also reveals the holistic focus of the discipline. Other definitions correspond, stating that strategic communication is the communication of companies and organizations that has an explicit goal and is therefore success-oriented. As paraphrased by a German author, this also means that the communication of organizations and companies is based on “target-means-environmental-calculations” (Keding, 2015, pp. 47, 48). The term “calculation” stresses the first significant aspect: strategic. The activities are strategic, therefore planned rather than random or unintentionally communicated. It is also described as “a rich, multi-dimensional concept” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 27). Together with the second focal concept, “communication”, which includes the processes occurring as well as their outcomes, “the creation and exchange of meaning between the parties in a communication activity” becomes important (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 20). The resulting key questions for professional communicators are strategy formulations, communications alignments combined with organizational strategy, and the effectiveness of communication strategies (Thorson, 2013). Scholars also argue that the use of the term strategic communication should be further expanded to meet long-term issues in the postmodern environment (Hallahan et al., 2007, pp. 4, 5). Such adaptation is important for communication management nowadays, as coping with digital and
social evolution is often considered the most important topic (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2015) for institutions.

Dealing with “the ever-growing information flow, the need to address ever more audiences as well as building and maintaining trust are expected to be important issues” and will likely become even more important for the future (Zerfass et al., 2017, p. 53). These changes have fundamentally altered the operating conditions of, and widened the field for, strategic communication. It is a fact that digital transformation has changed the conditions for strategic communication regarding topicality, publicity, interactivity, and in terms of multimedia (Raupp, 2021). Organizations increasingly use digital platforms and instruments to communicate with each other, which creates new challenges, on the one hand, but offers new potential, on the other (Meier & Blum, 2020). Consequently, it can be said that this framework subsumes not only theories and concepts in an interdisciplinary discourse but focuses on topics and questions that deal with the use of new media and communication platforms (Zerfass et al., 2011, p. 96). This is a particularly important aspect of this thesis, as the increasing difficulty and complexity of digital communication challenges the “capacity [of] organizations to engage in long-term strategic planning” (Thorson, 2013) and will be discussed in Section 2.4, “Digital Lobbying”.

### 2.3 Strategic Communication and PR

The second decade of the 21st century has seen a discussion about the use of strategic communication “as an alternative terminology for the established discipline of PR, without changing the underlying research objects or perspectives of that field” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 490). Scholars argue that PR, which concern managing the external and internal communication of organizations, are now being replaced by strategic communication. Replacing terms in the field is nothing new. It is well known that even in academia, new terms can be introduced to overcome negative sentiments within a field or more clearly differentiate between similar concepts (Zerfass et al., 2018). Translations, especially, have caused the overlap of concepts and changes in meaning, as in the current case. The US concept of PR is translated into German as “Öffentlichkeitsarbeit”, that stands for the famous conceptualization by Oeckl of “work with the public, for the public, and in the public” (Oeckl, 1964, p. 36). Further, Zerfaß et al. clarify very clearly that (2018, p. 490):
“the term “Öffentlichkeit” does not mean the same as a public in English, but it relates to the public sphere as an area of discourse. Many British companies name their public relations departments “public affairs” and limit “public relations” to relations with the media, while in the United States and Germany, “public relations” is placed over “public affairs” in professional and academic taxonomy, as the latter is defined as the part of public relations which deals with the government and other public influencers and decision makers.”

A more detailed discussion of the differences between English- and German-language descriptions of the object of the research follow in Section 2.3.2, “Lobbying Definition”.

With its two-way relational communication model, dialogic theory, PR has not only gone through a shift in focus from an organization-centered approach to a community-based one (Kent & Taylor, 2002) but has also seen a shift regarding the term itself. The 2011 European Communication Monitor states that strategic communication is an accepted alternative to the term PR (Zerfass et al., 2018, pp. 490, 491). European scholars reaffirm that, especially for communicative processes like these, choices in how to approach the specific meanings of different terms are changing (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 5). Alongside these conceptual aspects, developments in terms of content alignment must also be mentioned. Complexity increases in terms of transparency, or rather its lack, interconnectedness, and the dynamics of strategic actions in times of digital transformation (Kucharczyk, 2019; Dialer & Richter, 2019). Three aspects that summarise these complex conditions for successful digital strategic communication in academia are (Keding, 2015, p. 16):

- The selection of relevant communication channels becomes more complex;
- The use of more communication channels requires more coordination and support;
- The evaluation of activities in terms of goals and objectives becomes more difficult.

These aspects become extremely relevant in one specific form of communication with policymakers that extends beyond what PR traditionally accomplishes for companies in politics (Priddat & Speth, 2007): lobbying. The next sections open the debate on
lobbying research, particularly a working definition, and the question of how lobbying deals with the three aspects cited above.

2.4 Lobbying Research

The importance of studying lobbying is widely recognised and has implications for several fields, reflecting on the interdisciplinary character of the practice of lobbying itself. The largest amount of lobbying literature can be found in the fields of political science, communication (including media studies, PR, organizational communication, and strategic management (Hallahan et al., 2007)), and sociology (Nothhaft, 2017, p. 18). However, the topic goes further and has been applied to business (Bouwen, 2004; Köppl & Kovar, 2001; Sievert et al., 2016), historical comparisons (Alemann, 2000; Balosin, 2012; Joos, 2011), and the analysis of the field in different countries (Bitonti & Harris, 2017; Broscheid & Coen, 2006; Burns & Carson, 2002; Nothhaft, 2017, p. 18). The following chart summarises the disciplines in which lobbying research has been conducted:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Lobbying Research</th>
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<tr>
<td>Political Science</td>
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<td>Communications</td>
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<td>Sociology</td>
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<td>History</td>
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<td>Business</td>
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The underlying thesis contributes to the research field of lobbying by mainly complementing to strategic communication research at the intersection of political communication research.

Practitioners and academics agree that lobbying is a specific form of communication between interest representatives and policymakers (Bentele et al., 2013a; Joos, 2016; Kentrup et al., 2013; Rieksmeier, 2008). However, lobbying practice and lobbying research are rarely considered from both perspectives, or the three perspectives offered when political employees are included (Nothhaft, 2017), even though communication can be analysed and interpreted from two perspectives: the transmitter’s (mostly lobbyists) and the receiver’s (mostly policymakers and their employees). Most analyses
are only carried out from the transmitter’s perspective (typically lobbyists) and not that of the receiver’s (and even less include employees to the political side).

An exhaustive study reveals that communication within lobbying practice “negotiated in interactions with politicians, administrators and others is [also] not researched” (Nothhaft, 2017, p. 17). It is suggested that, in brief, “lobbying at the micro-level seems to be just “talking” and does not deserve further explanation” (Nothhaft, 2017, p. 17). In terms of communicative research, it is striking that only a few recent studies address the communicative arguments used by lobbyists in any detail. Therefore, scholars have used framing theory to determine how, exactly, lobbyists argue (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Ihlen et al., 2018; Klüver, Mahoney, et al., 2015). Framing is a communicative action that emphasizes a certain political or social context, debate and direction, it shapes a certain understanding and interpretation highlighting the benefit of the perspective of the framer (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Hallahan, 2011, p. 178; Ihlen et al., 2018). These researchers found that the “type of group and policy issue influences [sic!] what frames are chosen. Furthermore, when several interest groups adopt the same frame [understood as a stable entity to choose from], the chance of policy success increases” (Raknes & Ihlen, 2018, p. 2). Consequently, to develop more knowledge about lobbying, it is important to analyse the communication process further.

The amount and depth of empirical research also depends on lobbying actors and institutions. In Germany, there has been comparatively little research regarding companies, for example, as associations (due to their historically particular relevance (Hoffjann, 2020b, p. 3)) have for some time been the main actors in interest representation and, thus, the research focus (Kentrup et al., 2013, p. 344). Another reason is that it is easier to access information from non-profit or public actors. Nevertheless, research has continuously widened and continued to reflect the complexity of the field over recent years. The development of research on business lobbying has recently increased as companies have their interests represented by individual lobbyists or specialised lobby agencies (Bouwen, 2002; Kammerer, 2014). Scholars have described this change in actors affecting the traditional role of associations as a more complex situation, especially since actors in fields such as PA overlap in practice (Priddat & Speth, 2007, p. 11).
Today, individual association members have more branches and heterogenous goals, which makes interest representation more complex. The literature describes this effect as the “individualization of interest mediation” (Mayer & Naji, 2000, pp. 39, 40). In Germany, smaller, more specialised associations and special interest agencies have arisen in recent years, while the number of members in the traditional large associations that focus on the main sectors of the German economy has declined. These large associations, or “umbrella organizations”, have faced increasing difficulties in forming strategic coalitions. Such associations have a “megaphone” function (Priddat & Speth, 2007, p. 5), which works well as a means of lobbying on general topics and also in terms of legitimization (Hoffjann, 2020b) but rather slowly on particular ones (Falk et al., 2010, p. 122). One very obvious reason, for example, is the much-needed velocity in communication: it is no surprise that smaller institutions respond and communicate more quickly to changes (Hoffmann et al., 2007). Many companies, therefore, have either created new departments within their organization (Hoffjann, 2020b) or contracted an additional independent lobbying agency to work for their individual interests, which often have to be represented faster than a large association can manage.

2.4.1 Historical Development of Lobbying

According to various authors the word “lobbying” comes from the “hallway” of parliament. Thus, “lobia” (hallway of roman senate) symbolizes the beginning of lobbying as “an ancient form of political activity” (Jaatinen, 1999) that ever since represented the communication between policymakers and lobbyists. Key element is the traditionally non-public character of the relationship where individuals communicate individual interests – not including the public directly – on behalf of third parties (Zimmer, 2021).

In the 1960s, Ernst Fraenkel articulated the need for the representation of private interests as a legitimate democratic tool in Germany (Fraenkel, 1964). Under this pluralistic view, contrary to the previous domination of particular interests, a normative ideal of political action was created: public interest. It is argued that pluralism thereby symbolises the foundation of interest representation and, especially, lobbying (Klein et al., 2003, p. 2). Over several decades the pluralist view, supported and further developed by Arthur Bentley, Robert Dahl, and David Truman, became very strong.
The explanation of why organizations lobby is that it is part of the natural response of coming together to address a problematic political issue, but it also reveals a strong motivation to survive. The neo-pluralist view suggests that organizations lobby for the following reasons (Lowery, 2007, p. 45):

- the passing or blocking of policy initiatives;
- the severity of several lobbying tasks;
- the likelihood that they will be successful.

Corporatism has also provided interest groups with opportunities to influence policymakers but is criticised when interest groups become part of established systems which makes it difficult to challenge such systems later. Consequently, societal pluralization has increased (Ihlen et al., 2021, p. 309). Thus, the former concept of the integration or “incorporation” of organised interests into the political sphere (Burns & Carson, 2002, p. 130) has transformed over time (Alemann, 2000). The concept of neo-corporatism, known as participation and the formulation of political decisions, includes organizational differentiations as well as individualization and professionalization processes. During the last decade, in particular, the increasing strength of the professionalization processes of the business (Falk et al., 2010, p. 122) is rooted in the demand for transparent processes (transparency further described in section 2.4).

Organised interests, seen as a valid public response to policy conflicts are, within limits, seen as supportive of democratic governments and democracy (Lösche, 2006). At this point, it is also important to explain again why “lobbying” does not mean the same procedure in different democratic political systems. In the USA, lobbying is part of an open pluralist system. In European national governments, lobbying is part of neo-corporatist systems. Institutions vary and so, therefore, does lobbying as regards strategies, targeted policymakers, and tools (Lowery, 2007). Yet, a recent study claims that style of policymaking, whether corporatist, pluralist, or non-corporatist, affects lobbying less than expected, especially outside lobbying, as further explained in Section 2.3. The researcher found that the meaning of national differences in lobbying styles diminishes the more international institutions like the EU emerge (Brown, 2016, p. 301). Nevertheless, relevant definitions and understandings must be clearly discussed and are addressed in Section 2.3.2, below.
With the start of the 21st century, the research field of EU-level lobbying increased substantially (Alemann, 2000; Bračić et al., 2018; Joos, 2016; Lahusen & Jauß, 2001; Michalowitz, 2004; van Schendelen, 2007; Woll, 2006; Zeiner, 2015). The reason is that each EU enlargement increased the need of member states to access more information, especially in the economic sphere, and thereby also entailed a greater focus on Brussels and the lobbying world there. Furthermore, political processes increasingly occur at EU level and influence national decisions and legislation. Those lobbying at EU level ultimately have an indirect influence at national level (Dür & Mateo, 2014) which explains the increasing importance of the activity.

At the turn of the millennium, interest representation also saw the emergence of new trends, namely a “vast multiplication and professionalization of lobbyism, the use of new methods to influence politicians as well as public opinion and the media” (Bitonti & Harris, 2017; Meier, 2017). These provoked a strong public debate on the legitimacy of lobbying and a call for new regulations to assure the transparency of political decision-making (Meier, 2017). After a period of rapid growth, consolidation and professional compliance were born (Bitonti & Harris, 2017; Meier, 2017). Since then, the legitimization of lobbying has been a research focus for years, mostly viewed within the context of democracy, leading to the common conclusion that lobbying is anchored in democracy (W. L. Bennett & Manheim, 2001; Burns & Carson, 2002; Lösche, 2007; Streeck, 2006, p. 10).

Other scholars argue that there is an inequality of available resources to individual organizations that lobbying is a threat to democratic governments. Here, the original benign view of organised interests is rejected, and lobbying is seen from a “transactions perspective” (Lowery & Gray, 2004, p. 165). Such exchanges are characterised as relationships among political actors through processes of influence. Olson (2012) argues that single interests do not provide holistic incentives to mobilise, and only selective incentives are traded for participation. In his opinion, “rational, self-interested individuals will not act to their common or group interests” (Olson, 2012, p. 2). Thus, the author also talks about voluntarily coming together to represent interests and further separates smaller from larger groups.
It is also argued that small groups might sometimes even be more powerful due to their stakes in policy. Scholars still fear that such a non-representative sample of interests might then be dominant in purchasing policy (Lowery, 2007, p. 32). All in all, the most important argument here is that lobbying organizations do not reflect the distribution of interests among the public, but represent their own interests to survive (Lowery, 2007).

Historic and political developments in lobbying present different perspectives and concepts. The literature also shows several transformations. In Germany, the field has continuously striven to become more professional, including an official lobbying setting to increase compliance (Meier, 2003). The basis for such improvement is to find a common understanding of the field. Therefore, the terminology of the debate on lobbying will be explained in the next section.

2.4.2 Lobbying Definition

There is no generally accepted definition of lobbying in either political debate or academic discussion of the phenomenon. As explained earlier lobbying is traditionally understood as a rather private, non-mediatised representation of interests to convince political decision-makers (Joos, 2016; Kleinfeld et al., 2007; Krebber et al., 2016; Weiler & Brändli, 2015; Zimmer, 2021), but also as a strategically public media-mediated communication process with the same goal to reach political policymakers (De Bruijcker & Beyers, 2019; Filzmaier & Fähnrich, 2014; Krebber et al., 2015). Naturally, however, different scholars have brought varying perspectives into the field, which has resulted in the use of multiple terms, including adjoining fields. The chart below presents a selection to demonstrate the variety in opinions, including source classifications in academia (A) and practice (P).

*Table 2: Examples of Terms used in the Lobbying Literature (Source: Author)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>“By collaboration we refer to patterns of behavior where group and parties work together to achieve shared goals”. [...] Moreover, lobbying is not simply about persuading legislators to make certain decisions but about picking agents that can represent the interest groups. Party-group relations are not one-shot contacts, and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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| X | “We assume that all groups in society are organized and that each group makes contributions to individual lawmakers. […] Given the specific rules of legislative decision making, contributions are thus made strategically, to influence the design of proposals as well as law-makers’ voting behavior in the legislature” (Persson & Helpman, 1998, p. 3). |
| X | “Contrary to the popular opinion, lobbying is not a pure exchange relationship. Much more, the relationship between business and politics can be described as a two-stage delegation process in which the forms of disbursement are highly variable. The Management Board “hires” a public affairs agent. The latter in turn “commissions” the politicians (ministry officials, politicians, etc.). However, the “payment” is made in different forms and directions” (Priddat & Speth, 2007, p. 5). |
| X | Lobbying “is for social actors ultimately the procurement, selection and evaluation of information from the field of politics, and for politics direct or indirect, player-oriented work to influence the legislative and executive decision-making process. This interest-based interrelationship illustrates the “intermediary” nature of lobbying, which subsumes communications, interest and politics” (Joos, 2011, p. 20). |
| X | “Lobbying is a communication strategy and as such its success depends on numerous influencing factors and basic conditions. Relevant actors can be addressed with different lobbying instruments, which can be differentiated from the perspective of communication science with regard to their public, their formality and their contact. By means of this differentiation, certain instruments can be systematically assigned to certain situations and actors” (Köhler, 2018, p. 153). |
These definitions address several aspects. However, the researcher found several important differences throughout the literature:

- Actors (profit vs. non-profit);
- Tools (personal vs. non personal; analogue vs. digital);
- Strategies (mediatised vs. non-mediatised and public vs. non-public);
- Fields (PA, PR, GR, etc.);
- Directions (political to economic, economic to political, economic to public, political to public, public to political).

One reason for the difficulty in finding a common definition seems to lie in the common characteristics of related fields. The diversity and parallel existence of concepts of, approaches to, and ideas about lobbying are reflected in a lack of clarity regarding terminology (Zimmer, 2021, p. 4). The German word for “lobbying”, in particular, is a rather negatively connotated term which practitioners try to up-value by using it as a synonym for the more accepted and morally desirable term “PA” (Einspänner, 2010; Filzmaier & Fähnrich, 2014; Milinewitsch, 2005; Thummes, 2020). In English-speaking countries, “lobbying” – earlier described as “stimulation and transmission of a communication” (Milbrath, 1960, p. 8) – is part of PA, surrounded by a regulated political system; hence, it is less negative (Shapovalova, 2015; Thimm & Einspänner, 2012). On the one hand, the synonym PA widens the academic perspective on lobbying; on the other, it narrows it down in a certain way. The narrowing consists in the partial ignoring of classical core questions of political science. These include normative questions regarding legitimacy, as well as effectiveness in relation to governance and democracy (following the example of interest representation in the next paragraph). At the same time, PA expand the spectrum and procedures of lobbying by including more actors. Next to classic personal communication at all political levels, whether purely communicative or the long-term influencing of public opinion, the preparation of (scientific) expert reports and the consulting activities of law firms and agencies are also included (Zimmer, 2021, p. 7). Thus, not only do common characteristics exist, but several synonyms emerge.

A very popular related term is “advocacy” or “Interessenvertretung” (= representation of interest). Considered as a contribution to democratic governance, it is said that
“advocacy groups seek and policymakers grant influence” (Lucas et al., 2019, p. 408). Advocacy activities are originally undertaken by non-profit organizations to represent citizen interests in order to promote changes in public policy (Zimmer, 2021). As Guo and Saxton observe, the “advocacy function is crucial not only to organizations that engage primarily in external representational activities, but also service providers and other charitable organizations“ (Guo & Saxton, 2014, p. 3). Köppl explains differentiation in today’s use: The Anglo-American term is largely used in parallel to lobbying and often even in place of PA. He also notes that in the German-speaking world, “advocacy” is primarily used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to distinguish themselves from “business lobbying” (Köppl, 2017, p. 149), revealing a clear differentiation from non-profit actors. Zimmer also explains that the old concept of advocacy or, in German, “representation and mediation of interests”, is less relevant, since former social preconditions – large, comparatively homogeneous social groups, a high degree of organization of the population with a strong milieu influence, and a pronounced organizational loyalty among members (background to democracy) – no longer exist. Thus, advocacy is – also in German – more and more used as synonym for lobbying (Zimmer, 2021, p. 5), in the sense of an extension.

A further academic division has been made between the terms “pressure”, “pressure groups”, “lobbying”, and “lobby groups”. Pressure is understood to be exercised through the public. Here, interest groups exert public pressure by mobilising public opinion through media. In comparison, lobbying is described as more internal but also influencing individual political parties, parliaments, and governments (Greven, 2009, p. 141). Pressure groups are dominantly placed in US political science, through group theory, which is “based on the idea that groups will act when necessary to further their common or group goals” (Olson, 2012, p. 1). Thus, a joint approach is important here.

Scholars also separate lobbyists or, more precisely, lobby groups between “cause groups” and “sectional groups” as part of organizational structure. NGOs are, for example, thereby classified as cause groups with a strong member base, while interest groups belong to sectional groups, which are more hierarchical (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013, p. 186). This differentiation is used to refer to their strategic behaviour. Sectional groups tend to be associated with the use of inside strategies to establish direct contact to exchange information with decision makers. Cause groups, on the other hand, tend to
be associated with the use of outside strategies, where the public is involved via
demonstrations or protests to pressure decision-makers (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013, p.
186). A further distinction is made in German between “procurement lobbying” and
“legislative lobbying” (Lianos & Hetzel, 2003, p. 16). The first is principally concerned
with the acquisition of public contracts, while the second is understood as an attempt to
influence the design of the legal framework (Köhler, 2018, p. 150). Since many
differentiations exist, the following table demonstrates the definitions and key
characteristics between German and English terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representation</td>
<td>Representation (&quot;Interessenver-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tretung&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>Profit = agencies, companies, law</td>
<td>Profit =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>firms</td>
<td>agencies,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>companies, law</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|            |                                      | firms
| Strategy   | inside                               | inside      |
|            | outside                              | advocate    |

As these definitions not only include linguistic differences, but actual differences like
diverse actors, it is important to analyse these further. Thus, the following chapter not
only presents the different actors but also looks more closely into the meaning of the
word “lobbying”.

### 2.4.3 Lobbying Actors

Lobbyists are (or represent) individuals from the non-political sphere representing their
own or other interests (Speth & Zimmer, 2015), acting as:

- Individual lobbyists, agency lobbyists (Kahler & Lianos, 2003)
- Law firm lobbyists (Battis, 2015, 2020)
- In-house business lobbyists (Kentrup et al., 2013)
- Association lobbyists (Hoffjann, 2020b; Lösche, 2007)
• Institutional/NGO lobbyists (Bergmann & Strachwitz, 2015; Köhler, 2018)

Lobbyists are also described as “representatives”, “public affairs consultants”, or “government relations officers” and usually lobby on behalf of a third party such as companies, NGOs, or associations (Greven, 2009, p. 141). Practitioners also describe themselves as “intermediators” (Joos, 1998). An intermediary is the centre of the communication between two sides (as individual lobbyist, as agency, as law firm and at times as association) and therefore plays a major role in (Abbott et al., 2017, p. 14):

• Providing expertise and feedback in the process of facilitating the communication of an implementation;
• Monitoring the process;
• Building communities of assurance and trust;
• Developing target groups.

A major difference in the German- and English-language literature in terms of lobbyists is the inclusion of non-profit and profit actors. In the English-language literature, both fall under the same practice but obviously differ in terms of actors (resource-rich business associations vs. citizen groups), as the chart below demonstrates.

![Figure 8: Lobbying insiders and lobbying outsiders (Source: Dür & Mateo (2016), p. 5)](image)

In German literature, the differentiation is mostly indicated through the term, as lobbyists are mostly understood as actors of profit organizations whereas non-profit organizations “represent interests”.

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The following description of the “ideal lobbyist” presents a more detailed picture (McGrath, 2006, p. 69).

“All individual lobbyist operating within any political system will need particular professional skills and knowledge related to that specific system; it seems intuitively likely that lobbyists everywhere will draw on similar personal traits and qualities. That lobbyists are effective is important, not just only for themselves but also for their clients or employers; indeed, it could be argued that it is important for democracy or society that those who seek to influence the public policy making process do so professionally in order that the companies and organisations they represent are heard as clearly as possible by policy makers.”

Analysing “persuasive forms of communication” suggests the following list of “must-have skills” for a lobbyist: ability to listen, ability to be observant, courtesy, relationship skills, honesty, integrity, and credibility (Harris & McGrath, 2012, p. 2). McGrath (2006) also mentions the gender aspect, which is rarely discussed in the field, as the described skills are classically connected to female talents, which is why he records more women becoming lobbyists. A number of lobbyists have also identified the key functions that form the core areas of their role, as follows (Harris & McGrath, 2012, p. 4):

- Understanding own organization’s communication and decision-making process;
- Knowing the policy formulation and policy-making process;
- Network of contacts in area of operation;
- Dealing with the civil service;
- Dealing with parliament;
- Dealing with politicians;
- Dealing with ministers;
- Dealing with the media;
- Dealing with regulators;
- Dealing with local and regional government;
- Dealing with trade bodies;
- Dealing with transnational government and associated bodies;
- Contacts with party organizations;
- Managing relationships with policy think tanks etc.
- Coalition building with others around mutual policy interests
- Managing relationship with community stakeholders
- Gaining access to regular sources of policy information.

These key functions demonstrate very clearly that the receiver – political actor – plays a major role in lobbying. Without the traditional receiver side in politics, there would be no such thing as lobbying. Thus, scholars see that political institutions also rely on a constant supply of policy-relevant information (Chalmers, 2011, p. 17), which is why lobbying research should include both – political and lobby – perspectives.

Summing up the traditionally analysed side, it can be said that even though different lobby actors and different lobby organizations exist, they are all “placed on a common footing by having a common task [which] is perhaps the only arena of activity even potentially common to all organizations” (Lowery, 2007, p. 31). Lobbying of any actor is based on communication, whether in background discussions or public discussions, with supporting or counter opinions to influence policymakers (Zerfaß et al., 2009). The following sections look more closely at these strategic aspects.

### 2.4.4 Lobbying Strategies

The creation of a strategy affects the success or failure of lobbying and is therefore a central topic in lobbying research (De Bruycker, 2014). A very popular division is made between inside and outside lobbying strategies. The following chart demonstrates smaller differences in this classification.

*Table 4: Lobbying Strategies Overview (Source: Author)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Strategic classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Gais et al., 1991)</td>
<td>Inside and outside strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Gormley &amp; Cymrot, 2006)</td>
<td>Insider vs. outsider strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mosley, 2011)</td>
<td>Insider and indirect strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Guo &amp; Saxton, 2014)</td>
<td>Inside and outside the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ditr &amp; Mateo, 2016)</td>
<td>Lobbying insiders and outsiders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inside and outside lobbying

Inside lobbying occurs between the political and non-political spheres without the public being involved; hence, it entails direct access to decision-makers in the form of parties or the government (Weiler & Brändli, 2015, p. 746). Outside lobbying, in contrast, uses media or public support to influence the policymaking process (Beyers, 2004; Weiler & Brändli, 2015, p. 746). When parliamentarians are targeted, in particular, outside lobbying is practiced as public communication and aimed at voters to increase the pressure on a parliamentarian (Beyers, 2004; Binderkrantz, 2005; De Bruycker, 2014, p. 3). Lobbying outside the system consists of, for example, “public education campaigns, mass media overtures, and protests and demonstrations” (Guo & Saxton, 2014, p. 3). European researchers agree that “inside lobbying privatises conflict and restricts its scope, [while] outside lobbying aims at socialising conflict by publicly involving a larger audience of stakeholders” (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019, p. 3). The two Swiss researchers Tresch and Fischer (2015, p. 357) further differentiate four categories of outside lobbying “according to their target and degree of involvement of the public” as follows (Tresch & Fischer, 2015, p. 357):

- Media strategy: targets journalists to make policy positions publicly available through the news (e.g., interviews);
- Information strategy: activities concerning information about and from the public without direct citizen involvement (e.g., polling, monitoring);
- Mobilization strategy: targets citizens for participation through conventional activities (e.g., signing petitions);
- Protest strategy: targets citizens for active participation through costly activities (e.g., demonstrating, striking, or boycotting).

An additional definition says that inside lobbying is “intended to influence the content of a bill”; whereas outside lobbying “is intended to influence the likelihood a bill is enacted into law” (Wolton, 2017, p. 1). Further, scholars state that even the best outside-lobbying effort cannot successfully work without inside-lobbying support (Fähnrich & Mono, 2019, p. 13). In the USA, the effectiveness of inside and outside lobbying tactics
is described as depending on the popularity and salience of a policy issue (Kollman, 1998). Contrary to this understanding, one practitioner explains that inside and outside lobbying are defined according to the people involved. Under this understanding, a former or active lobbyist currently holding a political position as a parliamentarian, for example, is understood as being an inside lobbyist. Outside lobbying is, accordingly, described as being carried out by lobbyists who are not politically active (Joos, 2011). Instead of inside and outside, other scholars differentiate between direct and indirect lobbying. Direct lobbying is mostly seen as personal face-to-face contact with a legislator (Miller, 1994; Nicholson-Crotty, 2007; Rees, 1999; Wolpe & Levine, 1996). Indirect lobbying is seen as a nonpersonal communication channel, whereby telephone conversations or conference calls may be used as well as written communication by letter, message, or email (McNutt & Boland, 1999; Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013; Rees, 1999; Wolpe & Levine, 1996).

Another differentiation refers to the use of inside and outside tactics, which are both understood to “increase the salience of the information type” (Chalmers, 2011, p. 4). Thereby, outside tactics refer to interest groups that mobilise the public outside the policymaking system in order to contact or pressure officials inside it by using media, launching public campaigns, and even organising public events. Inside tactics involve direct forms of contact between interest groups and decision-makers, such as writing letters, making phone calls, and having face-to-face meetings (Chalmers, 2011, p. 7).

A German political scientist divides the “insider and outsiders approaches“ in “cooperation and confrontation” as the chart below demonstrates (Althaus, 2020, p. 5). Here, traditional lobbying and policy consulting is situated on the cooperation side whereas advocacy and activism is situated on the confrontation side:
Two further very popular strategic lobbying forms involve public movements. Grassroots lobbying is a network-supported movement with the goal of motivating the general public to become supporters (Hillebrand, 2017, p. 67). As Harris and Fleischer (2005, p. 111) observe, a grassroots program “is a continuous effort not only to persuade your people to become advocates for your issues, but also to educate them about the legislative process, provide access to elected representatives, create a sense of teamwork, and recognize stellar advocates.” Astroturfing, on the other hand, only pretends to have won relevant parts of the public as supporters and masks the real sponsors (Hillebrand, 2017, p. 67).

An aspect that US scholars have found to be a factor in deciding which strategy to use is the size of the affected jurisdiction. Findings have shown that the size of the affected jurisdiction determines tactics and the mix of organised interests promoting alternative policies (Lowery, 2007, p. 45). As these studies emerge from a two-party system, it is difficult to make them fully generalizable to the context of the present study; however, these aspects are important indicators of how to approach and analyse the subject. This is especially the case since scholars conclude that “interest groups rely on a wide repertoire of tactics for influencing public policies” (De Bruycker, 2014, p. 2).

It is important to say that strategic decisions are interlinked, which means that “the use of one tactic encourages or discourages the use of other tactics. Hence, tactics cannot be studied in isolation. Interest organizations make different tactical decisions that relate to
each other and these may jointly influence policy decisions” (De Bruycker, 2014, p. 15). Factors that shape the decision in terms of strategies are (Klüver, Braun, et al., 2015, p. 5):

- Complexity;
- Policy type;
- The status quo;
- Salience;
- Degree of conflict;
- Size and composition of lobbying coalitions.

Even though past research struggled to contribute to an overarching explanation or central framework that connects these aspects in terms of strategy, it has been argued that a strategy “is to a considerable extent an endogenous process” (De Bruycker, 2014, p. 15). In this perspective, lobbying is a strategy after all, coming from a political issue, aiming at a political goal. Therefore, the next chapter looks further into the direction at which a strategy aims: the lobbying goal.

2.4.5 Lobbying Goals

The goal of lobbyists is to influence the decision-making process (Greven, 2009), ultimately described as “the procurement, selection and evaluation of information from the field of politics, and for politics direct or in-direct, player-oriented work to influence the legislative and executive decision-making process” (Joos, 2011, p. 20). Influence is further described as “consisting of knowledge of the political processes and personalities as well as an ability to read the prevailing political [and] policy initiatives, and the ebb and flow of power through political networks” (Pieczka, 2006, p. 325). Power and network refer to the political perspective, which is rarely included in lobbying literature. Meier and Blum (2018) explain that politics is all about power as a system, but also for individual politicians. Hoffjann (2020a) approaches politics and political strategic communication as a play, saying that “the entertainment character is more important than the binding nature of the staging and the statements” (Hoffjann, 2020a, p. 267) of politicians. This approach reveals that the political perspective includes individual goals in terms personal positions especially in terms of political
power. Furthermore, content is also “played” as power regard to the position of a party and fraction (De Bruycker, 2016a). At this point, it should also be stated that the German term “Politik” stands for the overall action of creating and enforcing binding rules (Patzelt, 2001) and is translated as “politics” for this study. In its broadest sense, politics stands for the human action of creating and maintaining general rules under which to live (Heywood, 2000).

A practitioner even explained that to successfully convince political stakeholders on behalf of creating and maintaining these rules, three main goals must be achieved: “purchasing, selecting, and evaluating information that will result in repelling entrepreneurial disadvantages and/or aiming [for] and securing entrepreneurial advantages so that mistakes in governmental affairs or public relations of companies can be avoided” (Joos, 1998, p. 24). The following chart demonstrates this explanation in which information is the deciding feature:

![Figure 10: Lobbying as a system of negotiation for forming communication interfaces (Source: Joos (2016), p. 90)](image)

Hence, information becomes the major “exchange”, which is why a communicated message between two sides is often understood as “a currency” (De Bruycker, 2016b, p. 600). The following chart illustrates “information procurement” further:
At EU level, in particular, influence is traded for information, public support, or economic power (Klüver, 2013; Chalmers, 2013) and thus symbolises the importance of information itself. The idea of “transactions” of provided facts is well known in research on interest representation (Lowery & Gray, 2004), which is also described as “buying” attention and cooperation in the political sphere (Stevens & De Bruycker, 2020). Any information becomes more relevant when it helps “a policy-maker [to] assess the likely consequences of a planned policy change, [which is also] the primary factor explaining how close legislative proposals are to the policy positions of lobbyists” (Bernhagen et al., 2015, p. 2). The creation of policy change and all the information surrounding is the target for lobbyists in terms of abolishing, keeping, or enhancing an old or new rule or policy. Consequently, the EU transparency register defines the scope of the register as covering (Commission, 2007):

“all activities carried out with the objective of directly or indirectly influencing the formulation or implementation of European policies, irrespective of the channel or medium of communication used (media, forums, organising of events, think-tanks, etc.).”

It is important to say that information is also given from the political side to lobby groups. One recent study analysed the “influence flow” from policymakers to advocacy groups and concluded that political institutions can also shape the other side. They explain that the political side pressures lobby groups into defending policy positions in line with their preferences in a global context (Lucas et al., 2019, p. 408). In terms of
transparency, in particular, it is therefore necessary to analyse “goals” from two perspectives. The following chart demonstrates the decision-making process in terms of policy advice. Thereby, the term “knowledge-brokers” refers to the role of information.

![Decision-making process diagram](image)

*Figure 12: Decision making process (Source: Stasiak et al., 2018, pp. 1-12)*

### 2.4.6 Lobbying Timing

Lobbying not only consists of different actors or goals but also of different phases. These phases depend on the legislative process, which has a certain order in terms of timing. The main phases of a legislative process are (Köhler, 2018, p. 153):

- The legislative initiative;
- The preparation phase, including certain employees;
- Committee phase;
- During implementation;
• During evaluation;
• (Re)formulation of a policy.

Academics as well as practitioners state that the sooner political projects are worked on, the greater the chance of being able to influence them. Lobbying therefore usually starts at an early stage of a legislative process (Zerfaß & Piwinger, 2014, p. 13). To be more precise, before lobbying actively starts on a legislative process, a pre-stage must occur. Observing, collecting, and processing information relevant to a certain topic is the foundation for forming an opinion or at least being able to find an argumentation line-up for or against a certain aspect (Michalowitz, 2015, p. 414). A constant collection and evaluation of relevant information and documents follows, including first personal discussions with politicians, opinion leaders, and experts to identify positions (Köppl, 2017, p. 107).

Greven (2009) also explains lobbying in terms of three phases in a policy process. During the first two phases, it might be necessary to show more or less commitment, depending on awareness of a topic and whether it is already involved in a legislation process or not. The decisive factor is how the topic develops, so a continuous monitoring phase starts. Monitoring means registering related topics and where relevant actors stand towards them to construct a strategy. Therefore, information is gathered by observing the environment around the topic, the developments regarding the topic itself, and others working against it. However, the most intensive moment is perceived during the third phase: policy (re)formulation (Greven, 2009, p. 151). It is this last moment that can change everything through the simple adoption of a word. Some scholars therefore see that lobbying strategies and success depend on different legislative initiatives and their phases (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Mahoney, 2007). Consequently, it is very important to understand how lobbying success is defined.

2.4.7 Lobbying Success

A main challenge in strategic communication is measuring its success. The challenge is based on the clarity of roles, expectations, performances (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014). In lobbying as well, researchers have struggled to directly measure the contribution of lobbyists due to difficulties in “statistical inference, estimation, and interpretation” (De Figueiredo & Richter, 2013, p. 11). The quantitative measurement of lobbying influence
has therefore been avoided (Mahoney, 2007, p. 35). Within the small body of literature regarding this aspect, it is argued that lobbying success is often based on whether a policy issue is being communicated favourably or unfavourably. To lobby for or against a policy issue can predict the overall outcome. Scholars see “being against” a certain issue as more difficult, especially when a decision-maker has to be convinced of the opposite than when the context is an unfavourable environment (Klüver, 2011, pp. 484, 485).

Furthermore, scholars see variations in lobbying success as depending on institutional environments (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Mahoney, 2007). An empirical study that includes an index to measure different lobbying forms and strategies even finds that group lobbying behaviour is conditioned by the institutional setting (Weiler & Brändli, 2015, p. 747). Another constantly growing aspect is the size of a lobby group. It is stronger to lobby as a group to achieve a certain policy outcome. Furthermore, when a lobby group is relatively large, it is expected to have a positive effect. When the opposite is the case, it is expected to be negative, which implies that it has not been sufficient to be recognised in earlier studies (Klüver, 2011, pp. 484, 485). These first indicators reveal possibilities of measuring success but also demonstrate how difficult it is, due to the number of (unpredictable) factors to be taken into consideration.

For a long time, several characteristics were missed in the analysis lobbying success. Interest groups were not always “fully analysed in the complex interplay between individual interest group behaviour and the overall institutional or policy context in which interest groups operate” (Klüver, Braun, et al., 2015, p. 4). This is certainly related, at least in part, to the difficulty of data acquisition and several transparency issues. However, one scholar recommends that “the effects of lobbying on public policy outcomes can be understood by closely looking at agenda-setting effects, information effects and persuasion effects” (De Bruycker, 2014, p. 15).

Regarding the German context, it is important to recognise that the debate about “successful lobbying” in the German literature triggered “professional lobbying” (Althaus, 2006; Klüver & Saurugger, 2013; Meier, 2003). While discussing the professional standards necessary to be successful (Wehrmann, 2007), actors try to further legitimise their business as well. Discussion of transparent lobbying also emerged in this context (Sandhu, 2012), particularly in regard to digital developments.
“Given the multidisciplinary nature and broad coverage of digital transformation research” (Verhoef et al., 2019, p. 3) the aim of the following chapters is to give a comprehensive overview of the most important communicative aspects, including in terms of transparency, with a concentration on the research focus.

2.5 Digital Transformation in Lobbying and Digital Lobbying Research

The change in internet use and digital communication is widely discussed in the literature (Dohle et al., 2014; Henn et al., 2015). Early on, scholars who analysed the internet and digital communication saw a chance to close the “digital gap” between businesses, lobbyists, and politics (Argenti & Barnes, 2009, p. 219). However, key questions on social media and its concrete use as an action repertoire for lobbyists have only recently drawn more attention (Meier & Blum, 2020). Moreover, the use of digital communication by classic lobbying actors such as associations (Hoffjann & Gusko, 2013) opened an ongoing academic discussion during the past decade. While some authors see the internet and digital communication as a “special [...] form of political PR” through “the mediation and representation of interests of companies, institutions, associations and organizations” (Thimm & Einspänner, 2012, p. 185), others criticise this approach, pointing out that different institutions, such as profit and non-profit organizations, who pursue completely different interests are too often mixed up and not analysed individually (Hillebrand, 2017). Indeed, findings from concrete analyses are often broadly applied to the general field, including of different actors who conduct political communication online. Since concrete research on digital lobbying has only recently begun, the following paragraphs give a brief overview of the most important changes within more general digital communication research.

Leading scholars recognise the advantages of digital communication activities as a means to coordinate internal and external actions with policymakers (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2012). It is argued that, through this new type of communication, dialogues, personalization, and general communication are, on the one hand, easier to handle than ever before but, on the other, require further analysis of new strategies (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2012). Hillebrand sees the use of digital communication as more than just complementary to the “old world”, arguing that it enables a new method of exerting power (Hillebrand, 2017, p. 67). In Hillebrand’s (2017) opinion, involving the public
further creates a more democratic framework for lobbying as the disclosure of the public’s will increases the weight of digital lobbying.

Nevertheless, scholars also point out that when it comes to digital communication, argumentation and persuasion are limited (Krebber et al., 2015, p. 307). Even though interest groups can use social media and digital platforms to involve and communicate with stakeholders, major differences in the use of these channels are confirmed: Some are only used as information channels, whereas others go much further (van der Graaf et al., 2016, p. 132). Variety in communication channels is regarded as risky. Today’s variety in digital media, understood as channels, is seen as uncontrollable due to rapidly advancing technical progress and the steady increase in communication possibilities. Connected to this thought is the medial fragmentation of more interest groups, which is also regarded as responsible for such variety (Keding, 2015, p. 15). The latest research has revealed the challenges of networking between those communication channels, monitoring them, and engaging in cross-media communication along the touchpoints with stakeholders (Pleil & Helferich, 2020). Consequently, successful digital communication is even more important to lobbyists. Still, scholars see an investigation gap regarding how, exactly, social media change the procedure of influencing the policy process (Kanol & Nat, 2017, p. 2), as the topic has been only briefly addressed in research to date.

2.5.1 Emergence of Digital Lobbying

More than a decade ago, the internet was already described as a “substantial instrument” for lobbying (Einspänner, 2010, p. 34). Some researchers even predicted that reaching the political field in the future would only be possible with an increased use of public channels such as social media (Bender, 2010). Indeed, scholars consistently identified an “increased usage of these channels by PA practitioners and stakeholders” (Fleisher, 2012, p. 7), pointing out that “the action repertoire of interest groups has changed and new forms of communication have been made possible [through] Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook” (van der Graaf et al., 2016, p. 131). The reason is that social media channels like Twitter and Facebook enable new modes of monological and dialogical communication to pass on simple information as well as persuasive communication (Krebber et al., 2015). Therefore, using social media and online networking for
information dissemination continues to be seen as a new scale of opportunity for interest groups. However, the flow of information within the political environment (Kurdashvili, 2017, p. 52) requires further investigation to achieve a full understanding.

In Germany, as well, the most recent literature suggests that lobbying can no longer be practiced without influencing public opinion and, in particular, the media. This opinion is based in the ever-increasing number of public lobbying activities, such as conferences, meetings, expert reports, and various forms of campaigning (Zimmer, 2021). European lobbying publications also suggest that “media has an impact on lobbyists’ communicative processes of influencing” (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 6) and understand social media as an addition to the lobbyist’s toolbox (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 10). Thereby, attention is specifically drawn to “rhetorical, media and strategic communication elements [that] increase [the] understanding of the role of communication in constructing the social reality around the issues advocated by organizations lobbying for or against a cause” (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 6). Again, a positive or a negative attitude seems to make a difference in a digital setting.

It is especially important to keep these strategic communication elements in mind since the first digital astroturfing studies are now emerging as well. As new voices compete with genuine grassroots actors in the public sphere, questions of legitimacy and credibility in the digital space are touched upon. One recent publication sees new actors competing with classic grassroots movements in the public sphere in terms of legitimacy and credibility, both being essential to interest groups communicating with and persuading the public. The author notes that private interests have less credibility; hence, front groups only appear as NGOs to better communicate their messages (Lits, 2020).

Nevertheless, scholars also recognise the increasing usage of digital communication by lobbyists and policymakers as a chance for more transparency, openness, authenticity, and collectivity (Einspänner, 2010; Fleisher, 2012). For PR research, transparency and in particular organisational transparency is defined as a characteristic of organisations to enable or guarantee open access and verifiability of internal organizational processes. Thus, organizational transparency is understood as a form of informational and communicative openness of organizations and their processes (Bentele et al., 2013b, p.
On the website of Lobby Control (a German club for more transparency), digital lobbying is said “to convey an innovative and transparent image and [to] make lobbying more dialogue-oriented” (Müller, 2019). Public communication channels encourage hope for more transparency in lobbying. Scholars explain that actors themselves still have to contribute to greater transparency as some MPs and even companies already do. However, this normative perspective gives a first idea of how lobbying could escape the suspected and negatively-connotated association with backroom politics (Krebber et al., 2015, pp. 307, 308). For such a major assignment, however, a full understanding and conclusive definition are necessary.

Although the German publication “Digital Public Affairs” acknowledges the emergence of digital lobbying as enriching and revolutionising the field of traditional lobbying, this is only the beginning for digital lobbying research in Germany (Thimm & Einspänner, 2012, p. 185). More research is necessary to fully understand how, exactly, digital strategies work and what role they play in lobbying and policymaking.

2.5.2 Digital Lobbying Definition

This section addresses the definition of a new research field currently described by multiple terminologies and given numerous interpretations. Using mass media for lobbying has, for example, been named “public lobbying campaigns” (Raknes & Ihlen, 2018, p. 6), “electronic lobbying” (Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013, p. 47), “lobbying in the virtual world” (Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013, p. 52), “digital public affairs” (Thimm & Einspänner, 2012), “digital advocacy” (Köppl, 2017, p. 149), “social-media lobbying” (Rabe et al., 2014, p. 5), “online lobbying” (Kurdashvili, 2017, p. 52), and “interest representation 2.0” (Einspänner, 2010, p. 20). The important point is that the objective of convincing a policymaker about individual and common interests in terms of a policymaking process continues to be the same in the digital setting (Krebber et al., 2015). Scholars state that “the assertion of interests is attempted to be realised through communicative influence” (Krebber et al., 2015, p. 292) but includes “a stronger public presence” (Einspänner, 2010, p. 20). Therefore, all descriptions in this context are considered as synonyms for “digital lobbying” in this thesis.
The following paragraphs further present distinct synonyms of lobbying as well as related fields and subjects.

“Online lobbying” is described as a “modern strategy of influencing the public opinion” and works in two ways: top to bottom and bottom to top (Kurdashvili, 2017, p. 52). “Electronic lobbying”, understood as “activities on the internet”, has been analysed in the context of non-profit organizations, where information technologies play a role in affecting legislation. Scholars have pointed out that electronic lobbying, being more accessible, is mainly seen as a strategy to advance policymaking and the representation of interests (Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013, p. 47). Even though electronic lobbying is already a reality, the techniques considered effective and the strategies actually employed are still rather new and have been little studied (Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013, pp. 47, 59). Köppl cites the Washington Public Affairs Council’s use of the following working definition for digital advocacy: “advocacy via blogs, social media, video and other online tools” (Köppl, 2017, p. 149). He further explains that “digital advocacy” is part of the area of “digital public affairs” (Köppl, 2017, p. 149) and, hence, directly relates to lobbying.

Another newly-emerged form of lobbying is blog lobbyism, also known as “blobbing”. Scholars describe companies that lobby through public blogs either as “overtly or covertly blobbying”. Overt blobbying is used when a company or institution runs an own weblog whereas covert blobbying consists of promoting a topic, product, or idea in a weblog through someone else’s blog. Both attempts clearly try to consciously choose topics to gain more publicity and reach their stakeholders (Fischer, 2006, p. 216).

A related aspect in terms of online interest representation is “e-collaboration”, which also evolved through the development of new technologies and the resulting new forms of interaction and collaboration (Rutkowski et al., 2002, pp. 119, 120). The term describes the internet-based network collaboration of several people in a virtual team (Tschanz, 2003). Scholars found that online-based teamwork will gain more and more importance as digital communication plays a key role in lobbying strategies. E-collaboration describes how individuals can start cooperating and thus influence political decisions (Friedrichsen, 2015a, p. 240).
The idea of utilising communication channels as a form of multiway communication to facilitate the examination of coalitions is defined as “e-cooperation” (Friedrichsen, 2015a, p. 236). Still, Lovejoy and Saxton argue that several studies demonstrate how non-profit organizations “have not been able to use websites as strategic, interactive stakeholder engagement tools“ (2012, p. 337). It must therefore be noted that there are considerable differences between individual players.

This review has drawn attention to the most important aspects of digital lobbying in the literature to date. Special attention has been given to the use of social media and online techniques to influence political decision-makers, including the public. Digital potential in terms of strategic settings, including (micro) targeting, framing, and other digital techniques, is rarely recognised in the lobbying literature. A working definition for digital lobbying is, ultimately, suggested by enriching parts of the classic lobbying definition with elements of the descriptions and explanations below (highlighted in bold) to find a digital frame:

A digital communication process between users and policymakers circulating information through a dialogue-oriented mediation (Müller, 2019) via digital and especially social media. On the one hand, the objective is to represent common interests, convey a fast, innovative, and transparent image (Müller, 2019), and mobilise others; on the other, it is to demonstrate political attention and the transparency of the policymaking process.

The next section presents first actors who claim to be undertaking digital PA or digital lobbying (without offering a concrete definition of the process).

2.5.3 Digital Communication by Lobbying Actors

The first companies, agencies and associations are publishing their lobbying activities on their website or even a specific blog to contribute to more transparency in Germany. The Metro Group for example even argues that they operate “via the[ir] digital lobby office” (see table below) while E-Plus for example runs a PA blog to debate topics and to provide information. The most important actions and procedures in terms of digital activities mentioned by these lobbying actors are:
- To enhance transparency: open access to information and positions;
- To provide a space to debate: more dialogue between actors and public;
- To monitor social media: generational change around the use of digital media and new formats;
- To bridge the gap between analogue and digital communication: (loud) political (fake) majorities in the digital arena.

The following table demonstrates these goals and purposes by the agencies and companies who communicate digitally in Berlin:

Table 5: Lobbying Actors who act digitally (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor + Link Website</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-Plus</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>“BASECAMP is Telefónica Germany’s PA blog. As a debate space, location for unique events and café, it is also the platform for the digital community in the capital.” (Since 2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Metro Group          | Company  | “Via the digital lobby office with its own website, we provide information on political and social issues that are important for us as a company, our stakeholders in politics and society, and also for our customers. Our public events and positions are also documented transparently here.”
   “The demands on companies to explain and represent their interests more transparently than in the past are increasing, so every contact person should be easy to find here. Our positions are openly accessible so that they can be included in political and social discourse and are thus also easier to find.”
   “In addition, we have also been using social media since 2010, tweeting with our own channel @METRO_Politics around the topics of
transparency, consumers, sustainability, food, small and medium-sized enterprises and other political issues – our entry into digital interest representation and at the same time an offer for dialogue.”

**UnionInvestment Bank**

“Why is transparency so important, Dr. Mai?”

“Transparency and credibility are top priorities at FinanzAgenda.”

“You know, the digital revolution has also changed the work in public affairs, i.e., lobbying. The digital age shows up in all areas of society. Not only the industry has already reached Industry 4.0, but also communication in politics has changed in the course of the digital transformation. The population is growing up more and more in social networks and with digital media. This trend can also be observed in politics and in political communication. The new generation of parliamentarians in particular, both at the European and national level, moves quite naturally in digital formats and uses them, for example, to form political opinions. New media offer us new opportunities to communicate with politicians and, at the same time, with politically interested people and stakeholders. Political dialogue no longer takes place in private as it used to, but is open to everyone.”

**GEMA Company**

“GEMA runs political liaison offices in Berlin and Brussels. GEMA’s Political Communications Division is responsible for the important collaboration with the decision makers in German and European Union politics. Our team acts as a point of contact for politicians as well as...
for partners from the **political-cultural sector** – and **answers their questions** on GEMA’s duties, function, distribution method and strategic focus.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Huawei</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>“Welcome to Huawei’s Digital Head Office”</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“With our #AskHuawei campaign, we want to enter into a <strong>dialogue</strong> with you, initiate discussions, and <strong>create transparency</strong>! You can ask your questions about our company via Huawei Germany’s social media channels: Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook. There you will also find out when the next round of #AskHuawei will continue!”</td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>TUI</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>“The Corporate Office in Berlin is the <strong>point of contact</strong> for all companies within the group and <strong>represents the interests</strong> of the TUI Group with 70,000 employees with regards to the German government, Bundestag, embassies and associations.”</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“With the events series <strong>policyLOUNGElive</strong> and the publication <strong>policyAGENDA</strong>, we are <strong>contributing to anchoring the significance</strong> of tourism policy in the political landscape of Berlin. In this web portal, we present the different facets of the market leader from Germany and <strong>open up exciting new perspectives</strong> on the tourism industry.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| Microsoft | Company | “The policy team at Microsoft Berlin is your <strong>point of contact</strong> for everything to do with the <strong>opportunities and challenges</strong> of a digital Germany. In the heart of Berlin, we make digital transformation tangible and <strong>deal with current digital policy issues</strong>. Microsoft Berlin is a |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverb</th>
<th>Agency</th>
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</table>
| “ADVERB supports the Initiative New Social Market Economy (INSM) in its **digital public affairs work**.”  
“Together with the organization, we developed a **channel strategy for the short message service Twitter** to place INSM’s messages with **political and media actors**. In doing so, we accompanied INSM over several years during the implementation. A central component is **extensive monitoring of topics and stakeholders**.  
We regularly develop **new formats** and make tweeting **recommendations** in order to introduce demands, positions and **content into the political debate**.” | |

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Instinctif</th>
<th>Agency</th>
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</table>
| “Political discourse is becoming more digital, louder, and more creative: **Public affairs must also reposition itself today**. Political managers, company representatives, media executives and campaigners are noticing this more and more frequently:  
It has become **more difficult** for traditional public affairs to **reach politicians effectively**. Instead of picking up strong facts and messages in face-to-face conversations and from the leading media, **politicians are increasingly sensitive to what appears to be the majority in the digital arena**.  
That’s why public affairs managers need to use digital channels as amplifiers to bridge the gap between different communication worlds and real majorities.” | |
Oliver Schrott Kommunikation

Agency

“The coronavirus pandemic has put political decisions and daily government actions into the media and public spotlights like no other challenge in recent decades. Topics such as Brexit, the U.S. elections, data protection or climate change are also highly relevant to society and must be communicated and consistently explained. At the same time, companies, associations and other institutions are trying to communicate their content and get through with their messages. This can only succeed with targeted, comprehensible and increasingly digital communication, without which younger target groups in particular can no longer be convinced. We’ll work with you to develop a customised approach that fits your company, association or organization. What sets us apart? The modern mindset of our team, our high digital affinity, our in-depth public affairs knowledge – and a headquarters right at the centre of the capital’s political life: Unter den Linden.”

2.5.4 Digital Lobbying Strategy

As social media have taken a central place in lobbying strategies and are consequently part of the object of this research, this chapter looks more closely at the strategic use of social media. Generally speaking, “social media” stands for internet-based applications (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), either in the form of Wikipedia-type collaboration projects or social networking sites that (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, pp. 60, 61):
• Create and exchange user-generated content;
• Enable real-time communication;
• Permit two-way communication between users.

Explanations of the term often emphasise the developments around social media: the culture of dialogue, discussion, and open expression of opinions (Ebersbach et al., 2011; Schmidt, 2009). In this new culture of communication openness, transparency and willingness to engage in a dialogue take on a new meaning. Today, the five main capabilities enabled by social media are identified as (Scheufele, 2020, p. 13):

• To participate (e.g., voting for web content on Reddit);
• To talk (e.g., commenting on a blog entry);
• To share (e.g., posting videos on YouTube);
• To cooperate (e.g., Wikipedia);
• To network socially (e.g., on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn).

These features demonstrate quite clearly that the issue is not merely theoretical; hence, practical dynamics are at play. The individual characteristics of each channel not only reveal the importance of selecting the relevant communication channels but also underline that more communication channels require more coordination and support (Keding, 2015, p. 16). The actual use of social media by lobby organizations has been less examined and analysed empirically, so only a small amount of interest groups literature reports on profit organizations (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016, p. 18; Hemphill & Roback, 2014; Hoffjann & Gusko, 2013; Rabe et al., 2014). However, the literature on social media as a tool for organizations or grassroots and social movements has been growing and demonstrates their potential and importance (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Müller, 2019; Nah & Saxton, 2013). Non-profit organizations use different social media platforms for different purposes, knowing that they provide an extensive new marketplace to give voice to their ideas (Auger, 2013). The advantages of social media strategies are, therefore, not only that they provide information but also that they mobilise supporters and interact with multiple constituencies (Fígenschou & Fredheim, 2019, p. 1). Scholars therefore say that social media engender “new paradigms of public engagement” (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 337), which touches on the democratic aspect in terms of participation, as in former classic lobbying discussions.
Chalmers and Shotton (2016) bring crucial information about the social media tools used by a variety of interest organizations beyond non-profit organizations. Their starting point was the “largely outmoded set of pressure strategies ranging from letter writing campaigns to phone calls” (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016, p. 2) based on older studies (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Mahoney, 2008). The study presents two central findings: Decision-makers at EU level were rarely lobbied through social media; and interest groups mostly use social media as an attempt to imitate and compete with other actors. The explanation for using social media is purely financial, namely the comparatively small cost of social media technologies (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016). All in all, the study finds that use of social media tools depends on “(1) group resources, (2) adoption costs (3) issue variation and (4) imitation” (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016, p. 5).

Even though the study adds to the small amount of literature by including all types of interest organization from the EU transparency register, it only represents the EU level. No study has yet been undertaken of national contexts within Europe. The authors clearly recommend more academic research in other European countries (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016, p. 19), which includes the current German-focused study.

Another study observed certain challenges as well as inspirations regarding the attention of policymakers when it comes to established interest groups and new movements. These are described as driven by digital natives, organised non-hierarchically, and working upon a cause-specific topic: “For all interest groups, being noticed by those in power is imperative; hence, interest groups employ a number of strategies to promote their interests vis-à-vis government agencies, parliaments, and the public” (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2019, p. 1), whether they are profit- or non-profit lobbying actors.

Other scholars verify that social media offer a number of advantages for both group types, non-profit interest groups and large profit ones. Remarkably, this EU-wide sample showed that social media was not the weapon of the weak. Non-profit organizations do not use more social media tools than firms and larger lobby groups when trying to reach their stakeholders (van der Graaf et al., 2016, p. 132). It remains to be seen whether application will continue to converge over time.

Finally, a study of environmental advocacy groups explores how social media have changed the speed and duration of communication (Merry, 2013). The author analysed
responses of environmental groups in both new and classic media: tweets, blogs, emails, and press releases. The results prove that responses were given more quickly on Twitter than on the other studied media (Merry, 2013). The article also demonstrates “that the medium matters not only for the speed and duration of interest groups’ responses to focusing events, but also for their framing of those events” (Merry, 2013, p. 319). Groups framed their content differently on Twitter than in other media, which is why a strong potential for Twitter has been identified. Since Twitter has not only further evolved as a tool but also reaches a larger number of people since then, the next chapter looks more closely at the increased influence of this medium and the ability to use it more effectively.

2.5.5 Twitter as a Tool for Non-profit Actors

The main focus in social media research has been on non-profit organizations, which are increasingly using social media to more effectively mobilise the public (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Hackler & Saxton, 2007; Krebber et al., 2016; Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013; Nah & Saxton, 2013; Oliveira et al., 2016; Saxton et al., 2007; Suárez, 2009). Research has even shown that non-profit organizations have a stronger presence on Twitter and are more successful at strategically using the platform. Therefore, this chapter presents key Twitter studies and their findings regarding the research focus.

Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) analysed 73 non-profit US organizations among a sample of 2,437 Twitter posts. They identified three functions through 12 types of tweets, namely “information, community, and action” (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 341), enabling all individuals and institutions to openly use the platform (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012):

1) Information function: publishing activities and sharing relevant information with the public;
2) Community function: engaging in dialogue to build, strengthen, and maintain relationships with the public;
3) Action function: mobilising followers to stand up for the organization through donations or active participation at events.
The study demonstrates that non-profit organizations engage with their stakeholders dialogically (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), which proves the need to analyse lobbying from a dual perspective.

Guo and Saxton (2014) also analysed Twitter communication. More specifically, they examined a sample of 750 random tweets from 150 charitable organizations. Their classification scheme also includes three functions (Guo & Saxton, 2014):

1) Reaching out to people function: publishing the organization cause;
2) Keeping the flame alive function: maintaining the constituency which has been built and keeping the public interested;
3) Stepping up to action function: calling on the constituency to act on behalf of a particular cause.

Their overall finding is that Twitter has become an influential communication tool for NGOs as social media are more used to educate the public than to mobilise it (Guo & Saxton, 2014).
A third in-depth Twitter study of 1,000 Tweets at EU level built on the two studies outlined above in terms of categories and enriched the analysis by including more actors. Based on the European Commission’s Transparency Register categories, the following classifications were made by (Kanol & Nat, 2017):

1) Sectional groups: “trade and business associations” and “trade unions and professional associations” – profit organizations;
2) Cause groups: “nongovernmental organizations, platforms and networks, and similar groups” – non-profit organizations;

The study reveals differences in social media use: cause groups use social media a little more than sectional groups in terms of two-way communication with the public. Cause groups also mobilise the public more to act, which is explained by the nature of the causes. As cause groups lobby for topics that are more suitable for protest, it is easier to motivate people to take action than it is for sectional groups (Kanol & Nat, 2017, p. 5). These findings also match the characteristics previously considered in terms of being for and against a lobbying topic.
Social media, and especially Twitter, have caused fundamental changes in how lobby organizations can communicate with policymakers and vice versa. Through tools like Twitter, information is shared with a wider audience that is relevant to political opinion-forming and decision-making processes. Thus, a wider digital range is created, which fundamentally changes the starting position for lobbying. It is therefore of the utmost importance to further analyse these changes.

2.6 Research Gap

This literature review has revealed a major research gap which refers to the context of digital lobbying in Germany. When evaluating the literature one can notice how extensively classic lobbying has been researched in several disciplines: political science and communication science, in particular, have dealt intensively with lobbying, including lobbying in Germany. However, changes due to digital transformation and social media clearly open up new questions regarding consequences and functions. The research gap also refers to a missing lobbying theory: no acknowledged theory formulation in terms of lobbying exists, which is especially problematic when addressing the new and evolving field of digital lobbying. This gap must be closed in the long term. As a lack of theoretical sophistication and insufficient insights has already resulted in a so-called black box (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Bernhagen et al., 2015; Beyers et al., 2013, p. 184; Klüver, 2013; Nothhaft, 2017, p. 27), it is particularly important to prevent the same development in the case of digital lobbying.
The research gap also refers to the method: most studies only include one perspective rather than both communicating perspectives. Few studies include the political side in their analysis (Nothhaft, 2017). Researchers and practitioners express their concern over the neglect of transparent processes, inside structures, and access to informal communications, which can only be granted through a holistic analysis (McGrath, 2009; Zerfass et al., 2019). Since no transparency register existed in Germany, it is difficult to address this subject, exposing a major research gap. Therefore, the RQs are:

**RQ 1:** In what ways do policymakers and lobbyists relate to each other?

**RQ 2:** How does digital transformation, especially the use of social media, affect lobbying?

**RQ 3:** What characterises digital lobbying, and how do “classic lobbying” and “digital lobbying” coexist?

The following section briefly summarises the most relevant content of the literature review – in particular to the raised research questions.

### 2.7 Summary

In summary, existing lobbying research within offline settings indicates an accumulating body of knowledge as well as first indications of non-profit advocacy strategies and tactics regarding online settings.

An overview of the most important fields in lobbying research and the literature is summarised in Table 6. These sources shed light on the topic from a theoretical angle and aided in the conceptualization of this thesis.

*Table 6: Overview of Literature used for this Research (Source: Author)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Source / Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legitimization</td>
<td>• Analysis of democratic legitimacy</td>
<td>Lösche, 2007; Bennett &amp; Manheim, 2001; Burns &amp; Carson, 2002; Streek, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations / Interest groups</td>
<td>• Analysis of actors</td>
<td>Kollman, 1998; Alemann, 2000; Beyers, 2004; Köppl &amp; Kovar, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National comparisons</td>
<td>• Analysis of national structures</td>
<td>Persson &amp; Helpman, 1998; Sebaldt, 2010; McGrath, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU lobbying</td>
<td>• Analysis of supra national political structure and actors</td>
<td>Joos, 1998; Lahusen et al., 2001; van Schendelen, 2007; Michalowitz, 2004; Dittr &amp; Mateo, 2014; Zeiner, 2015; Klüver, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business lobbying</td>
<td>• Analysis of actors</td>
<td>Klein et al., 2003; Kleinfeld et al., 2007; Althaus, 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO lobbying</td>
<td>• Analysis of actors</td>
<td>Yang, 2018; Köhler 2018, Danelzik, 2018; Nitschke &amp; Douges, 2018; Rademacher &amp; Remus, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New media in lobbying / Political communication</td>
<td>• Analysis of (digital) communication conditions</td>
<td>Conroy &amp; Vaughn, 2018; Speth, 2015; Rutkowski et al., 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency in lobbying</td>
<td>• Analysis of critics and potential</td>
<td>McNutt et al., 1999; Meier, 2017; Müller, 2019; Sandhu, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalization of lobbying</td>
<td>• Analysis of change in profession</td>
<td>Arnim, 2000; Lösche, 2007; Kentrup et al., 2013; Meier, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual factors in lobbying</td>
<td>• Inclusion of contextual aspects in analysis</td>
<td>De Bruycker, 2014; Weiler und Brändli, 2015; Klüver, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying communication process</td>
<td>• Inclusion of processual understanding in analysis</td>
<td>Lasswell, 1948; Milbrath, 1960; De Bruycker, 2016; Nothhaft, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing theory in lobbying</td>
<td>• Analysis of communication strategy</td>
<td>Klüver et al., 2015; Baumgartner &amp; Mahoney, 2008; Ihlen et al., 2018; Hallahan, 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, an overall examination of lobbyists in social media environments is lacking. The conditions of communicating in the digital era have changed for all actors due to online communication and social media use (Conroy & Vaughn, 2018, p. 100; Wallner, 2017, p. 2; Yang, 2018). The latest research even sees digital transformation affecting communication in the communication function itself (Pleil & Helferich, 2020). These conditions consequently change how people communicate and maintain interpersonal relationships (Ledbetter, 2017) and how fast they need to adapt to changes (Gimpel & Röglinger, 2015).

There is no doubt that the lobbying literature has identified a specific transformation of the field as the communication infrastructure changes and thus, the political environment (Diederich, 2015; Joos, 2016). Hence, scholars and practitioners studying lobbying agree that it has become more important to research digital lobbying (Krebber et al., 2016; Thimm & Einspänner, 2012). Thimm and Einspänner (2012) argue that digital lobbying is a “young discipline that enriches and revolutionises the areas of classic political PR” (p. 185) and offer an overall academic research perspective to improve the understanding and evaluation of these developments in the political context (F. Fischer & Miller, 2017). This is particularly the case since digital instruments not only present new opportunities to mobilise the public but are also seen as a risk because public communication can be “reinterpreted” by anyone (Hofmann, 2010, p. 301) or appear “one-sided” (Rhodes, 2007, p. 1258). The researcher therefore concludes – in a wider sense – that the following points of research are relevant to this thesis:

A) Digital transformation changes how society communicates
   • Access: Through social media, everyone can talk to everyone (Bimber & Copeland, 2013);
   • Relationship: In a digital setting, conditions for creating and maintaining trust are transformed (Blöbaum, 2016, p. vi);
   • Transparency: The internet enables everyone to publish anything (Fleisher, 2012).

B) Digital communication has arrived in the political sphere
   • Proximity: Political institutions increasingly use social media channels to communicate with their citizens (Dubois & Martin-Bariteau, 2020);
• Distance: Anyone who had been carefully kept at a certain distance from policymakers (or vice versa) is now able to get very close (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2017).

C) First interest groups use social media as a tool
• Actors: non-profit and profit actors communicate digitally (Kammerer, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).
3  Research Methodology

A research methodology is used to bring structure into a setting, and for qualitative analysis a research methodology is used to particularly bring meaning (Saldaña, 2015). For a nontransparent field such as the topic of this research, in particular, structure and meaning are very important. As the researcher is trying to discover categories rather than verify an existing theory, this research is exploratory in nature. The thesis is therefore based on a qualitative perspective and uses a GTM approach. This approach was largely selected because one of its major strengths is that it enables a researcher to recognise the studied phenomena holistically (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 16). Consequently, it offers an opportunity to shed light on the so-called lobbying black box in the digital setting.

The present study was undertaken by the researcher in her dual capacities of former practitioner and researcher. As she has a background of working in a lobbying agency and political institutions before and during this research, it was clear that interpretation would play a more central role in this thesis than is usual. Additionally, the researcher did not want to reject the possibility of enriching this study through past experience and the thoughts which derive from it, especially since the nonpublic aspect of lobbying has previously created challenges for research in terms of generating reliable data. Considering that practical work experience helps to provide a better understanding of the overall research ground (Danelzik, 2018; Nothhaft, 2017), the researcher decided to use her unique access and experience to contribute to the research field.

This crucial aspect led to qualitative research based on the constructivist paradigm with an interpretivist stance. Academics confirm that in such a setting, the person reading a text, collecting data, and choosing which data to collect plays a different role due to the researchers experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The following chapters, therefore, explain in more detail where this research approach comes from and how it is applied.

3.1  Introduction to the Research Methodology

For any qualitative research, the goal is to understand the studied phenomenon to ultimately answer the RQ. Consequently, the chosen interpretive stance “has much to
offer” (Creswell, 2007, p. 3). Further explanation of interpretivism follows in the Section 3.3., “Philosophical World Views”. In order to understand the phenomenon researched in the current thesis, the researcher drew upon interviews and FGs. Based on a qualitative, explorative stance, the researcher made use of data collected via semi-structured interviews (n=15) and FGs (n=31), as further explained in Section 3.7. The researcher mainly analysed the data through several coding rounds and memo-writing and challenged it through ethnographic data drawn from her own experiences. For the qualitative coding process, Saldaña’s manual was crucial for the assessment of different coding types, examples, and exercises (Saldaña, 2015). Coding techniques were used as a process that could lead to the emergence of conceptual categories and the final code (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 1; GroundedTheoryInstitute, 2008).

The overall process for this thesis is GT, with the goal of developing a process model. Communication research differentiates between transmission models and constitutive models. Under the transmission view, the two communicating sides (relational partners) successfully decode each other’s messages and communication. Under the constitutive view, the focus is on the technical processes, and relationships are seen as existing because of the communication itself (Craig, 2013). Understanding communication as transmission, scholars conclude that “theories of communication should explain the sources, processes and effects of transmission” (Craig, 2013, p. 41) as Harold Lasswell does in his classic formula.

The researcher’s ambition to develop explanations for the research context is realised by using this inductive methodological approach to identify patterns and connections in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Therefore, the next sections first explain qualitative research (Section 3.2) before looking into philosophical worldviews (Section 3.3) with a special focus on the relevant interpretivist paradigm (Section 3.3.1) and constructivist paradigm (Section 3.3.2). Then, GTM (Section 3.4) is presented, including the used methods of interviews (Section 3.5), ethnography (Section 3.6), and FGs (Section 3.7). In this thesis, interviews and FGs were used as research techniques to collect data through group interaction on the topic “lobbying in times of digital transformation”, enriched by an ethnographic touch. To understand the reasons this combination was chosen, the following sections explain the background to, and technique used in, each method.
3.2 Qualitative Research

A key decision for a researcher is whether to undertake quantitative or qualitative research, or a combination of the two. For this study, a purely qualitative approach was chosen although both methods are appropriate in “evaluative inquiries” (Guba & Lincoln, 2001, p. 1). It is important to say that, without comparisons to quantitative research, qualitative inquiry is a fully legitimate mode of social and human science exploration (Creswell, 2007, p. 10). Qualitative research includes many different perspectives. A crucial publication for qualitative research styles is Creswell’s overview of the five major and most frequently used styles in qualitative inquiry, on which this thesis drew heavily. Creswell (2007) not only explains the narrative, phenomenology, GT, and ethnography approaches but also offers case studies and discusses their procedures as well as limits. To conduct a qualitative study, it is important to choose the appropriate approach. The most popular are inductive and deductive approaches according to the individual case, problem, and RQ.

Deduction in qualitative research is based on existing theory, on which the researcher draws when analysing data (Kennedy & Thornburg, 2018, p. 50). Deductive inquiry can not only be used in qualitative research but also quantitative and mixed-method research (Creswell, 2009, p. 4).

Inductive inquiry tries to create theory, identifying patterns or emerging concepts for general statements based on a sequence of empirical cases (Kennedy & Thornburg, 2018, p. 51). Here, the researcher interacts with the data which, naturally, also means that observations depend on the researcher and might not always be the same. Another problem is that no certainty is guaranteed, as only a limited number of cases is observed in order to generalise them to a broader concept. All in all, the criticism of this approach is the difficulty of generalising the findings to other not studied settings (Firestone, 1993). Generalizability is, therefore, clearly not a strength of qualitative research (J. E. McGrath, 1981).

A third, even less popular, mode of reasoning is abduction, which goes back to the US philosopher Charles Peirce. Coming from his “highly original investigation” (Fann, 2012, p. 5), abductive inquiry means that old and new ideas are put together in a
different way to understand and explain data. New concepts are discovered by surprising phenomena that cannot be explained through pre-existing knowledge or theory (Kennedy & Thornburg, 2018, p. 52). Abduction is therefore understood as “selecting or inventing a provisional hypothesis to explain a particular empirical case or data set better than any other candidate hypothesis, and pursuing this hypothesis through further investigation” (Kennedy & Thornburg, 2018, p. 52). In all three options, qualitative research either takes place in a world of lived experience or compares it to such a world. The specialty is the recognition of how individual beliefs and actions intersect with cultures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). For social behaviour, in particular, qualitative studies have become more popular (Leung, 2015), and the acceptance of qualitative research has increased within social and human sciences (Saldaña, 2015).

The next section therefore first discusses realities and philosophical assumptions before looking more deeply at GTM and its origin and practice.

3.3 Philosophical Worldviews

“Philosophers are as free as others to use any method in searching for truth” (Popper, 2005, p. xix).

Karl Popper’s strong statement addresses all aspects of this chapter: the philosophical or scientific perspective, methods, and methodologies as well as truth and realities. The Austrian-British philosopher’s ideas on scientific methods and logic revolutionised science and knowledge. His legendary doctrine of “falsificationism” presents a major theory stating that refutation, not confirmation, is relevant to empirical research (Popper, 2005). More specifically, he states that theory makes predictions that could empirically be proven false. However, these predictions do not mean to be proven as such yet and therefore he speaks of the possibility of falsification. Popper argues that research means trying the risk of formulating a theory; hence, in his eyes, a researcher tries to formulate statements and theories that will then be tested (Popper, 2005). In his “asymmetry between verifiability and falsifiability” (Popper, 2005, p. 19), he also introduces a deductive kind of evaluation. Popper adds to these thoughts his perspective on inductive methods. In his opinion, these cannot be justified, which is why he denies
that the empirical sciences should take an inductive approach. Instead, they should proceed deductively as the logic is not disputed in terms of validity (Schurz, 1998, p. 28). Based on these fundamental aspects, a research design begins with philosophical assumptions, which makes thinking about claims to truth inevitable (Creswell, 2007). Hence, “beliefs about the nature of reality” must be declared (Mills et al., 2006, p. 26).

A particularly important issue in the philosophy of science is the logic with which a hypothesis is proposed. Philosophers mostly deny that such logic in proposing a hypothesis exists, stating that only the “logic of discovery” can be “concerned with the investigation of the methods of testing hypotheses” (Fann, 2012, p. 1). As the researcher tends to hold an objective, scientific approach to this qualitative research, it is important to explain the methods of the different philosophical world views and clearly position this study within them.

An “objective approach” leads to a discussion of personal worldviews, as every researcher has one or more. These are also known as “paradigms” or “sets of beliefs” within a research project. A paradigm is also known as a “worldview” and stands for “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). It is clear that these pre-attitudes inform the conduct, interpretation, and writing of a qualitative study.

Interpretive and theoretical frameworks are also often used to further shape a study. It is therefore of the utmost importance to explicitly mark and position assumptions, paradigms, and frameworks for this thesis (Creswell, 2007, p. 15). Several scholars have listed the different possible paradigms a researcher can use, including (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 198):

1) Positivism;
2) Post-positivism;
3) Critical theory;
4) Constructivism;
5) Participatory.

The four major paradigms of research represented by Creswell are (Creswell, 2007, p. 15):
1) Post-positivism;
2) Constructivism;
3) Advocacy/Participatory;
4) Pragmatism.

Over the years, lists like these have varied depending on the dominant research trend. Scholars know that paradigms differ substantially and that each researcher brings their own to their research. The paradigms stand for knowledge but vary in their set of beliefs, which can be narrowed down to an interpretive or theoretical stance. For this thesis, an interpretive stance is chosen. The researcher also believes that individuals shape a study in terms of the types of questions and problems that are examined, how data collection and data analysis are conducted, and how use of the information is evaluated (Creswell, 2007, p. 30).

Researchers sometimes combine more than one belief in their research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Science would not be science if there were no critique; hence, challenges to qualitative research follow. The interpretive traditions of qualitative research have been criticised by positivists or post-positivists, the so-called “new experimental qualitative researchers [who] write fiction, not science, and have no way of verifying their truth statements” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). Scholars also state that criticism has been directed at two different roles of qualitative methodology: Thus, its analytical, political, or external role is distinguished from its procedural or internal role (Seale et al., 2004, p. 7). Denzin and Lincoln even speak of paradigm wars: Between the 1970s and 1990s, the post-positivist-constructivist war against positivism dominated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1). With Egon Guba’s “The Paradigm Dialog” (1990), a cooperative phase between the different perspectives started and numerous studies were published (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2).

This GTM study integrates elements of the interpretivist, as represented by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, and constructivist, as represented by Kathy Charmaz, paradigms. The following sections give an overview of the key elements and explain the relevant aspects for this study.
3.3.1 Interpretivist Paradigm

Those who apply qualitative research using a belief system grounded in interpretivism separate a phenomenon that is investigated by natural sciences from one studied by, for example, social scientists and educational researchers. Situations analysed through interpretivist lenses are representations of recognised and described human experiences (Levers, 2013, p. 3). The nature of the phenomenon matters, so the interpretivist paradigm is described as the opposite of the post-positivist paradigm. It “is conceptualised as having a relativist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology and is aligned with post-modern thought” (Levers, 2013, p. 3). Thus, knowledge relies on a particular situation or context such as time, culture, or history and can therefore exist in numerous ways (Levers, 2013, p. 3). Interpretivists are guided by their set of “beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). Interpretive communities are directed at understanding a phenomenon from an individual’s perspective, investigating interaction among individuals as well as social issues and cultural contexts in which participants live (Creswell, 2007, pp. 23, 24). Thus, interpretivists understand the world in terms of the subjective experiences of individuals and create new knowledge by interpreting the meanings they attach to actions.

3.3.2 Constructivist Paradigm

“We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practice” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). This quote points to a crucial difference to other paradigms: The role of the researcher is to construct theory and, more decisively, constructivism is the paradigm that denies that research can be based on an objective reality (Mills et al., 2006, p. 26). Guba and Lincoln explain that “realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43). Therefore, they see uncovering meaning of the involved and then the comparison of the results to other situations the process to go for. Hence, the methodological belief is hermeneutic dialecticism (first and second steps) (Guba & Lincoln, 2001, p. 1). For the first step, a relevant question is: “What is going on here?”, enabling the “here” and its context to be evaluated (Guba & Lincoln, 2001, p. 2). The evaluator’s effort to deal with
the evaluation is explained in the second step, when results and discoveries are put into existing constructions or, sometimes, replace such constructions, depending on their novelty (Guba & Lincoln, 2001, p. 2). The result is a construct “produced by the interaction between the interpreter and the interpreted as situated in society. [Crucial at this point is, that the gained knowledge] of the observed is constructed rather than discovered” (Levers, 2013). In relation to this paradigm, the next two sections further explain the conceptual terms “ontology” and “epistemology”.

3.3.3 Ontology

Guba and Lincoln relate ontology to the nature of reality and label it “critical relativism” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Experience is unique, and human (semiotic) sense-making organises it into a “comprehensible, understandable, and explainable form, [which] is independent of any foundational reality” (Guba & Lincoln, 2001, p. 1). Hence, realities are subjective. The German sociologist Hans-Georg Söeffner notes that there is a difference between “linguistically interpreted and understood reality” (Söeffner, 2014, p. 51). To further explain: “reality only becomes visible once it has been verbalised, but a discrepancy remains between reality which has been lived and reality which has been interpreted” (Schachtner, 2020, p. 9). Accordingly, it is important to engage with the outside world, which also brings meanings with it; the combination then brings a new meaning to reality. Crotty even says that without this meaning and the individual’s consciousness, the world is meaningless (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). In practice, when “researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities. Different researchers embrace different realities, [which is also true for] the individuals being studied and the readers of a qualitative study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 18). Crotty therefore simply summarises ontology as the “study of being” (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Moreover, since any form of being depends on perspective, it is no surprise that Luhmann (1990) has also famously said that the world can be seen by actors as well as observers, and the two do not necessarily observe and distinguish in the same way (Keiding, 2011). Consequently, a constructivist answers the question about the nature of reality with multiple realities. Thus, a researcher needs many quotes to illustrate the analysis of the different perspectives and multiple realities of individuals (Creswell, 2007, p. 18).
3.3.4 Epistemology

Another central feature of all qualitative studies that goes back to basic philosophical assumptions is epistemology: how a researcher knows what they know (Creswell, 2007, p. 16). For Popper, the central epistemological problem is the “problem of the growth of knowledge. And the growth of knowledge can be studied best by studying the growth of scientific knowledge” (Popper, 2005, p. xix). In practice, qualitative study entails a close relationship with participants, which often includes studying a case on the ground. Being on the exact spot where participants live, work, or do what is being analysed gives detailed insights and provides knowledge about the overall context. The resulting advantage is that researchers are able to understand participants better as the distance, or objective separateness, is minimised (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 94). The resulting question is: What is the relationship between myself as a researcher and my interviewees? The answer is very different from other paradigms: Post-positivism, for example, entails a more distant and objective data collection whereas the constructivist perspective allows a closer approach and involvement with the data. Guba and Lincoln summarise the elementary epistemological assumption of constructivism as “transactional subjectivism, that is, that assertions about “reality” and “truth” depend solely on the meaning sets (information) and degree of sophistication available to the individuals and audiences engaged in forming those assertions” (Guba & Lincoln, 2001, p. 1). Spradley (1980) further differentiates between outsider and insider research positions and concludes that having more distance can be an advantage when it comes to observing the tactics and rules of participants. Impressions and perceptions are very strong, especially in the political field and lobbying. The circle of people’s perception is when people control the perception of other people who are actually influencing the first controlling ones again. This circle leads the researcher to the questions: What is truth? What is knowledge? Does it really exist? Can one actually create knowledge from the perceptions that form from data?

3.4 Grounded Theory Methodology Approach (GTM)

The founders of GT define their work as both a method and a methodology. Methodology is described as “the strategy, plan of action, process or design,” whereas the method itself is “the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data”
(Crotty, 1998, p. 3). Thus, GTM refers to whole research approaches whereas GT is considered to be the result of the analysis which in this case is (ultimately) a proposed theory (Mey & Mruck, 2009, p. 104). Scholars treat GT as a research methodology which takes a theoretical framework into consideration, which means that it belongs to the category of inductive methodologies (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 1). It is important to understand that it is a general method to find patterns in data in order to create a theory. Glaser and Strauss developed “the discovery of theory from data” to cover missing aspects in research on social life and, to some extent, theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Thus, it can be said that GT was the result of frustration felt toward theories of social sciences that were not suited to explaining smaller details on the ground. Moreover, even if something from the ground was researched and identified, it could be difficulty to find a way back towards the theory. Corbin and Strauss (1990, p. 5) further say that “procedures of grounded theory are designed to develop a well integrated [sic!] set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study. A grounded theory should explain as well as describe.”

The Grounded Theory Institute summarises well: “the systematic generation of theory from systematic research” (GroundedTheoryInstitute, 2008). Thus, the overall goal is not only to find relevant conditions in a research context, but also to define how interviewees counter changing conditions and the consequences of actions. Corbin and Strauss (1990) stress that a researcher is responsible for catching such interplay, using research procedures including open-ended and iterative processes that involve data collection and data analysis.

Even though “the positivist, objectivist direction [the founders] gave grounded theory” can also be seen as a weakness, since heading towards a reality can often only be explored and understood by the researcher themselves (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, p. 33), GTM is still the solution to many challenges. In German-speaking countries, it is this openness that has led to GT gaining more attention since the turn of the millennium (Schachtner, 2020, p. 10). GTM also counters the concern that qualitative research does not sufficiently demonstrate how data relate to theory by concentrating on relevant data-to-theory connections. The relationships among emerging concepts not only lead towards the phenomenon of interest but also establish their dynamic interrelationships in terms of the expected theory or, in this case, theoretical model. For model builders,
the key questions are to explain emerging concepts, themes, and dimensions and clarify their interrelationships. “Speaking in classic boxes-and-arrows terms, this process amounts to assembling the constellation of boxes with a special focus on the arrows” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 22). Thus, looking at a GT model should reveal intimate knowledge of the data through the transparent relations of the essential concepts, themes, and/or dimensions. Hence, the researcher has “the possibility of theoretical insights that would not be apparent simply by inspecting the static data structure itself.” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 22). In any case, it is a process that involves many steps.

Over the years, GTM has shaped other qualitative research styles because it is reality itself that is shaped by dynamic and, more importantly, subjectively lived experiences and perceptions. These principles are still fundamental today because of the opening questions, which represent the basis of the approach (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019, pp. 206, 207): How can one explain empirical fields sensitively and understand different participants and their reality?

### 3.4.1 Introduction to Grounded Theory (GT)

GT was formulated by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in 1967, and their perspective dominated the field for many years. It emerged because the “grand theories” of the 1960s lacked means both to uncover details on the ground and recirculate them to generate new theory. The lack of this “ambition and methods to discover and generate new theories” underpinned the need for an “inductive, iterative, and systematic research approach” for social sciences (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019, p. 206).

Glaser and Strauss originally introduced data analysis in GT as a method for constant comparative analysis. The following four procedures of data analysis demonstrate how to code explicitly and constantly (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105):

1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category;
2) Integrating categories and their properties;
3) Delimiting the theory;
4) Writing the theory.
Many scholars have discussed the methodology and developed the original idea, including the founders. At a certain point, different positions were taken within GTM: the positivistic stance followed by Glaser and the more pragmatic one of Strauss and Corbin (Strübing, 2007). A third, more constructivist, position was developed by Kathy Charmaz (1996), whose guide to GT was very useful for this study (Charmaz, 2006). Some researchers are, however, of the opinion that the constructivist methodology can also be traced back to Strauss (1987) and Corbin and Strauss (1990) and their relativist position (Mills et al., 2006; Strübing, 2007).

GT methods described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) include the involvement of the researcher in simultaneous data collection and analysis, and the creation of codes and categories from data rather than from preconceived hypotheses. The literature review, in particular, reveals intensive debate. The distinctive aspect is a detailed pre-review of literature which is not supported by the Glaser approach (Glaser, 1992). Although Glaser emphasises an open and creative way of interpreting data, his perspective is not followed, as the literature review is an important element in this particular research process. The literature review is essential to prove research gaps and decide whether GTM is an appropriate methodology to close any such gaps (in this case regarding digital lobbying). Interviews are also heavily debated: Glaser criticises Charmaz, for example, for relying too heavily on interviews as the main data-gathering method when, in his perspective, they are only one aspect of GTM (Glaser, 2002, p. 2).

The founders and further researchers have developed ideas and positions in GT over the course of time. Thus, it is important to look into the different perspectives: the more structured original and the less structured ones such as Kathy Charmaz’, for example, to tailor a method, especially since all perspectives belong to the same “family of methods” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b, p. 11). The following table demonstrates relevant authors within the perspectives.
### Table 7: Overview of GT Paradigms (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>German/English speaking world</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Several perspectives, paradigms / reaction to positivism / roots in pragmatism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Cho &amp; Lee, 2014)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Levers, 2013)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mruck &amp; Mey, 2007)</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Strübing, 2007)</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Morse et al., 2016) - Adele Clarke was one of Anselm Strauss’ students</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructivist paradigm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Breuer et al., 2019)</td>
<td>German</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Thornberg &amp; Dunne, 2019)</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Belgrave &amp; Seide, 2019)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Flick, 2018)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pentzold et al., 2018)</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Thornberg &amp; Charmaz, 2014)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since GT refers to both methodology and research style as well as the resulting product terms (Breuer et al., 2019), it is important to clarify key terms, since different directions and steps exist.

#### 3.4.2 Key Terms in GTM

Gathering enough data is only the start and must be followed by synthesising and, most importantly, making analytic sense of it (Charmaz, 1996). Doing so includes coding and analytic memo-writing, which are concurrent qualitative data analytic activities. Scholars even say that they are in “a reciprocal relationship between the development of a coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon” (Weston et al., 2001, p. 397). More details of these key terms — codes, categories, themes, memos, and theoretical sampling — and their use in this thesis are discussed in the following sections.

#### 3.4.3 Coding and Codes

GTM intends to develop a systematic theory, for which coding is needed. In fact, one of the most important processes in analysing data is coding. To conceptualise the
interviews, content is brought together in a new way (A. Strauss & Corbin, 2010). Saldana recommends that researchers “[t]hink of a code not just as a significant word or phrase [they] applied to a datum, but as a prompt or trigger for written reflection on the deeper and complex meanings it evokes” (Saldana, 2009, p. 42). At this point, it must be said that coding and analysis are not the same. The word “coding” comes from the Greek and means “to discover” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 8), which is the initial step. Hence, coding is one part of data analysis and is conducted in several rounds. The analysis follows.

In addition to coding the discourse with short phrases, the pre-coding phase includes highlighting, bolding, or underlining rich or significant quotes (Saldaña, 2015). These “codable moments worthy of attention” (Saldana, 2009, p. 16) are the first indicators for the detailed coding process. The following are some of the many practical techniques for coding:

- Line-by-line coding: a detailed coding process that keeps the researcher close to the data and thereby reduces the probability of input such as “motives, fears or unresolved personal issues to [the] collected data” (Charmaz, 1996, p. 37).
- Process coding: explicitly looking for processes in the data. This step is nicely explained by one of Charmaz’ metaphors about process coding: that it will “generate[...] the bones of your analysis [that you] will assemble [...] into a working skeleton” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45).
- In-vivo coding: when codes are used by words “from the participant’s own language in the data”, they are called in-vivo codes (Saldaña, 2015, p. 264).
- Values coding: a method of assessing “a participant’s integrated value, attitude, and belief systems at work” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 105).

The GTM approach chosen by Strauss and Corbin (2010) presents open coding as the first coding step in the process. Thereby, data is broken down into pieces without any pre-defined categories or codes (Strauss & Corbin, 2010, p. 44). For this first coding round, it is recommended to remain open and keep the codes simple. Charmaz (2006) notes that researchers stay close to their data by moving quickly through it.
The second, very important, coding round is called axial coding, in which different relationships are tested against data and the previous open coding round. The aim of this phase is to find connections for further development. In this round, Strauss and Corbin (2010) also suggest working with a paradigmatic model, namely a “coding paradigm of conditions, context, strategies (action/interaction), and consequences, subcategories” connected to a category (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 13). The founders of GTM explain that this model is similar to schemes used in other types of qualitative research; however, GTM offers a more “concerted” approach.

The following chart demonstrates the paradigmatic model that was later used to find relationships between the codes.

![Diagram of Axial Coding](image)

*Figure 16: Axial Coding by Corbin and Strauss (2010) (Created by author)*

As a later step, selective coding is used to wrap categories up into a “core” category. Some categories have to be further explained in this step and even enriched with descriptive details (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14). More precisely, selective coding means choosing a core code. The founders of GTM speak of a “central phenomenon” because this code integrates all other codes around this central idea (A. Strauss & Corbin, 2010, p. 94). Hence, the goal is to find the core category representing the central phenomenon. To do so, they recommend the following questions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14):
• What is the main analytic idea presented in this research?
• If my findings are to be conceptualised in a few sentences, what do I say?
• What does all the action/interaction seem to be about?
• How can I explain the variation that I see between and among the categories?

Hence, the overall aim of the methodology developed by Strauss and Corbin (2010) is to find the core phenomenon in the data that can be connected to all other concepts. First, therefore, patterns have to be found that can then be grouped by similar characteristics.

### 3.4.4 Categories and Themes

Comparing all the codes to each other is the next step in creating final coding groups. These are called categories. Corbin and Strauss say that making comparisons “assists the researcher in guarding against bias, for he or she is then challenging concepts with fresh data. Such comparisons also help to achieve greater precision (the grouping of like and only like phenomena) and consistency (always grouping like with like)” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 9).

This is done by synthesising the codes’ meanings. At first, these categories are primary; at some point, however, they become a major theme. Hence, they are in fact a “primary theme or major conflict, obstacle, problem, issue, or concern to participants” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 268).

Neither the codes in categories nor the category itself are theory. However, standing for an abstract that integrates several aspects, categories become keystones in developing a GT through the theme they represent. When the categories are compared, the statement of possible relationships might indicate themes that “create an outcome proposition based on their combination” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 10). Corbin and Strauss describe the ability to demonstrate themes systematically as basic in the development of theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 55) All in all, the researcher has to think critically about what they are doing and why. The current researcher confronted and often challenged herself as the fact she had practical experience in the field could have led her to make assumptions. In such a situation, it is of the utmost importance to recognise that own
thoughts, actions, and decisions can shape how the researcher “researches” and also how they see data.

3.4.5 Memos

Methodologists state that there are different types of memos. Saldaña, for example, differentiates between the “coding memo, theoretical memo, research question memo, [and] task memo,” labelled according to their primary purpose. Saldaña also quotes a recommendation by Kathy Charmaz, who says memos should be written “like letters to a close friend” (Saldana, 2009, p. 42). What has to be clear is that memos “are not simply about ‘ideas’. They are involved in the formulation and revision of theory during the research process” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 10). Corbin and Strauss (1990) also explain that writing memos is a process that starts from the beginning.

When researchers do not write memos, Corbin and Strauss (1990) state that many conceptual details are lost or left undeveloped. The researcher therefore did not move directly from coding to writing to ensure a well-developed integration of the analysis.

3.4.6 Theoretical Sampling and Analytic Induction in GTM

Next to constant comparative analysis, the second key characteristic of GT is what the founders refer to as “theoretical sampling”: “the process of collecting data for comparative analysis” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 9), which combines initial data collection and analysis with subsequent data collection and analysis. Hence, the choice of data is controlled via theoretical sampling (Mey & Mruck, 2009, p. 110). Theoretical sampling is different from other samplings and associated with the GT approach based on analytic induction. Analytic induction is treated like a model for qualitative research design and portrays inquiry as an iterative process (Hammersley, 2003, p. 16). Thereby, defining the phenomenon is the first step, followed by examining cases of the explained field and formulating a hypothesis. It is important to say that analytic induction, as GT, opposes testing the hypothesis. Other aspects shared with GT are the attempt to develop a theory from a rather small example case base and the flexible operation from which theory emerges from data and its analysis (Hammersley, 2003, p. 17). Charmaz explains this step on the way to developing an emerging theory as “seeking pertinent data” and
further explains that the “main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory. You conduct theoretical sampling by sampling to develop the properties of your category(ies) until no new properties emerge” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96).

In order to prove what is being analysed, different experiences and voices need to be included. Subsequently, different passages from different data are used to form further categories and final components for the emerging theory. In these final steps, empirical generalizations are also sought. When including multiple dimensions in the study, researchers must be theoretically sensitive with data analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014).

### 3.5 Interviews

Empirical social research uses expert interviews regularly (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Individuals who experience or have experienced the phenomenon studied are interviewed to collect data from them. The inclusion of first-hand statements, perspectives, and even perceptions of multiple relevant actors provides a concentrated, descriptive view of a research topic. More precisely, researchers speak of interviewing 5–25 individuals based on a purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

The procedure includes a series of steps to identify the purpose and consequently determine the type of interview to gain valuable information toward answering the individual RQ. The following are three examples of interview types (Creswell, 2007, p. 132):

- Telephone interviews;
- FG interviews;
- One-on-one interviews.

In the social sciences, interviews are commonly used and are broadly differentiated into the following three categories (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 41):

- Fully-standardised interviews;
- Half-standardised interviews;
- Non-standardised interviews.
Traditionally, qualitative research relies on face-to-face interviews for semi-structured and in-depth interviews, while telephone interviews are typically used for shorter and structured interviews (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004, p. 108).

It is important to say that before conducting an interview, the researcher should gain consent from the interviewee to use the content as data and, if possible, to record it. A consent form should also include the purpose of the study as well as the duration and any plans for using the results of the interview (Creswell, 2007, p. 134). During the interview, the researcher should be a good listener and, if agreed, record proceedings so that writing the protocol becomes easier and mistakes (e.g., incomplete parts) can be avoided (Creswell, 2007, p. 134). Furthermore, fully- or half-standardised interviews follow an interview guide or script containing sample questions that is prepared beforehand to structure the interview topic (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130).

3.6 Ethnography

Ethnography highlights the importance of studying everyday phenomena and provides a technique to understand a certain practice “in the most basic form of social research” (Atkins & Hammersley, 2007, p. 2). Researchers have portrayed it as a descriptive and explorative method, storytelling, or as testing a theory (Atkins & Hammersley, 2007, p. 1). The increasing interest in this qualitative method is rooted in the fact that it offers an alternative to quantitative methods by providing detailed information through observed characteristics of participants or key informants. It is these contacts that guide the researcher to understand the overall phenomenon. Wider-scale data are usually gathered in an empirical but rather unstructured way (Atkins & Hammersley, 2007). Studied moments include not only the main actors but also the context, counterparts, and interactions: “The interactions should be studied in their particular contexts and seen as jointly accomplished by the involved participants. This includes the entire situation, what both persons are actually doing in the situation and how the interaction is negotiated” (Nothhaft, 2017, p. 60). Ethnographic data is gathered by observing or shadowing from within, that is, “following someone (at work) like a shadow” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007); hence, the researcher establishes a direct relationship with the actors in their natural environment.
The purpose is to observe and describe behaviour, interaction, and participation in any routine, rule, or situation in order to understand the meaning behind acts and actors in their own sense-making of a situation (F. Fischer & Miller, 2017, p. 409). Another possibility is to be “a participant-observer in the explicit or public role [as] researcher, rather than in an ‘insider’ role. Here, the emphasis is more on ‘observer’ than on ‘participant’, although the researcher is present on site, accompanying policy-relevant actors as they attend to daily tasks and so on” (F. Fischer & Miller, 2017, p. 410). Of course, the researcher role always depends on the needs of a study as well as the possibilities of engagement, which determine whether they can act as a researcher or as an insider.

Thereby, the given context is one of the most important aspects in a work-based investigation that “inevitably makes a difference to [this] research” (Costley et al., 2010, p. 1). Shadowing limits the research material to manageable proportions as it allows a researcher to select material as a practitioner (Nothhaft, 2017, p. 58). In short, it is up to the researcher to decide what they find relevant for their research (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007, p. 10).

Furthermore, autoethnography “is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). As an insider, one is in a unique position to analyse and challenge particular subjects in depth, bringing the necessary knowledge to access people and information. Research also speaks of “epiphanies”, which are understood as “remembered moments perceived to have significant impact” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 275).

When dealing with complex subjects, in particular, the insider perspective brings special advantages in understanding the tensions between the specific and the general while, naturally, undergoing a reflection process (Costley et al., 2010, p. 3). Self-development is a key concept for autoethnography as the method requires an understanding of both the professional and the personal self. Therefore, self-management and a constant debate in regard to insider-led work are necessary (Costley et al., 2010, p. 4).
Auto ethnographers use tools and research literature to examine experiences not only from their own perspective but also from that of others. Using personal experience that is reflected in existing research enables them to depict broader pictures of the phenomenon so that insiders as well as outsiders understand it (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 276); “thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273).

3.7 Focus Groups

Robert Merton – known as the founder of FGs – started to investigate audiences during World War II while showing mass media productions. He first published his pioneering research with Patricia Kendall in 1946. Since then, FGs have been used for critical research in several disciplines (Field, 2000; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Even though the research tool has a history in early communications research, its use has been in decline in social science research for some time (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Today, studies in sociology, market research, organizational research, health research, and media and communication research, for example, can be found using FGs.

FGs are used to discover participants’ meanings and ways of understanding certain issues (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). A certain depth of understanding of subjects is gained through this method because “the focus group is regarded as a simulation of various aspects of social communication” (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 18). The aim is to identify difficult issues by generating substantive material. This complex process of producing valid data by dialogue demands a long process of searching for meaning in the data (Field, 2000, p. 332). So, data needs to be understood and finally to be interpreted as well. All FGs must have the following three components (Morgan, 1996, p. 130):

- Research method with clear goal to collect data;
- Interaction of group discussion as source of data;
- Active researcher role creating group discussion to collect data.

Compared to an individual interview, a FG offers a better chance of developing a conversation, conferring greater depth on results (Reid & Reid, 2005). The specialty in
a FG setting is that “the subject of investigation and the investigator are interlinked in a communicative way” (Chioncel et al., 2003, p. 498). The group process can develop further arguments by a joint discussion of topics. The results show how a group thinks and feels about certain aspects and why certain opinions emerged (Benighaus & Benighaus, 2012, p. 130). The interaction between the participants is led by the moderator and, later, allows the researcher to observe and analyse the degree of agreement or disagreement between them. Therefore, it is mainly the group that is considered and not the individual as the unit of analysis (Chioncel et al., 2003, p. 496). There are significant advantages to the researcher being present, which is why the researcher can also take the double role of moderator. The moderator ensures that the time schedule is met, the discussion remains focused, and that every participant has the chance to speak, for example (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

3.7.1 Theoretical Aspects of Digital FG

The theoretical approach states that participants of a FG are professionals in a particular field on which the FG content is based. The participants’ professional experience helps to achieve the aim of either creating more knowledge on an issue, or explaining why a particular problem exists, how it develops, and what the solutions to it might be (Chioncel et al., 2003, pp. 497, 498).

A study that compared face-to-face FGs with FGs conducted via computer-mediated communication found that the volume of new ideas and answers generated did not differ. Even though face-to-face FGs contribute more to a discussion, the computer-mediated communication FGs contributed more useful data for the discussion topic (Reid & Reid, 2005). The results mirrored an earlier study which asked whether the medium matters and, similarly, found no difference in quality whatever the amount of communication (Straus & McGrath, 1994). Still, it must be mentioned that conducting digital FGs “requires reflexivity and adjustment, including attention to the positionality of the researcher, the nature and level of participant involvement, and adjustment to the loss of non-verbal cues and interactions” (Moore et al., 2015, p. 17). Taking these results, the researcher decided to adapt the original research plan to include digital FGs.
A significant aspect of the selection of participants is the number per FG. Science is not unanimous on the ideal number but, broadly, recommends between five or six participants as a minimum and ten or twelve as a maximum (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 6). In order to offer a constructive, concentrated conversation in a digital setting, this number had to be reduced to three to five. With the traditional number of participants, it would have been difficult to conduct the sessions in the same timeframe.

3.7.2 FG Researcher-Moderator Role

As stated above, the moderator plays a crucial role in gathering data through FGs: They must encourage participants to contribute their opinions while simultaneously monitoring overall interaction. A practical recommendation is that moderators use a schedule or key point list, which is especially important for more dynamic conversations (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 6).

A moderator’s involvement is measured in the number of asked questions, which leads to two categories, namely “less structured” and “more structured” discussion (Morgan, 1996, p. 145). The exact number of questions to be posed within a certain timeframe is not clearly defined. However, a less structured discussion stands for a more open group discussion that pursues its own interests. A more structured approach, on the other hand, means that the moderator plays a stronger role and is responsible for imposing the researcher’s interests. In this case, questions embody these interests and thus guide the discussion (Morgan, 1996, p. 145).

3.7.3 FG Analysis

Analysing data that results from FG discussions has three layers (Willis et al., 2009, p. 133):

- Individual layer;
- Group layer;
- Group interaction layer.
A closer look at the data reveals that the different layers are not always separate and might lead from one to another; thus, they are not necessarily used in a specific order. For the individual layer, for example, it is important to combine all opinions and comments expressed by one participant. Such individual evaluation might bring enriching insights as individuals might change perspectives throughout the discussion; therefore, it is important to analyse how participants “function” within the group. Questions that help are (Duggleby, 2005, p. 832):

- Is this view relevant to what is being discussed?
- Is the perspective similar to or in conflict with the overall group perspective?
- Have the view and opinion changed throughout the discussion?
- How did they change? Did they emerge because of some other participant’s views?
- Was the person influenced by the group? Or did this person influence the group?

Of course, it is important to also check reciprocal behaviour and reactions. The individual’s contributions to the group might have triggered how other members treated the participant. Thus, the following questions were asked by the researcher (Duggleby, 2005, p. 835):

- How did the group react to one particular comment by one participant?
- Were certain views supported or ignored? Why?
- Did the group somehow silence one person? Or did one participant try to enforce one opinion?

For the group and group interaction layers, it is important to look into the overall dynamics that evolve. Therefore, questions are:

- Did the group find common ground?
- Did a shared identity grow? How did individuals jointly construct it?
- What was the group’s self-positioning towards a topic?
- How did each participant respond/contribute/self-position to the construction of this identity?
• Did any group member distance themselves from the group?

To further analyse FG data, the following checklist was used to generate more ideas of where particular attention should be paid and when to look more deeply into the different layers while coding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Analysing group interaction.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group component</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What?</td>
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<td>Who?</td>
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<td>How?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(adapted from Stevens, 1996: 172)

*Figure 17: Analysing group interaction (Source: Willis et al., 2009, p. 133)*

### 3.8 Research Design

This thesis is based on an explorative stance and mainly considers Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Charmaz (2006), since the relevant circumstances are best covered by their positions. For example, it was known in advance that, due to the researcher’s work experience in the field, certain knowledge would, to some extent, shape this research, which should be reflected in the theoretical research approach (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher’s experience as former employee at a lobby agency and also as the employee of a German MP during this research project contributed to her understanding of the political and the lobby perspectives not only from a theoretical angle but also in the context of practical everyday business. Thereby, the given context “inevitably makes a difference to [each] research” (Costley et al., 2010, p. 1). As Charmaz said, “Thus, the grounded theorist can elaborate and refine the generic process by gathering more data from the diverse arenas in which the process is evident” (Charmaz, 1996, p. 41). The researcher especially agrees with Charmaz that one cannot totally exclude own
experience or oneself from the research process, which is why own experiences were used to challenge the findings.

All in all, the researcher chose these perspectives and processes to generate theory without building on preconceived hypotheses. Going through the different positions and perspectives in GT helped the researcher to find her own way and best work with the data.

The following chart demonstrates the chosen research design, which includes interviews as first data source and FGs as second, with both communicating sides. The interview results were then challenged through the researcher’s ethnographic data to create a pre-model. These findings served as a discussion document in the (digital) FGs to verify and further develop these first results.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Interview pilot phase</td>
<td>Testing pre-interview questions with lobbyists / politicians or representatives of the political sphere</td>
<td>Final interview question guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Qualitative data collection 1a</td>
<td>Political qualitative interviews (German MPs and their employees)</td>
<td>Interview transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Qualitative data collection 1b</td>
<td>Lobbyist qualitative interviews (Agency, association, company lawyer)</td>
<td>Interview transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Qualitative data analysis</td>
<td>Two coding rounds (manual and NVivo)</td>
<td>Prototype model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Focus group pilot phase</td>
<td>Testing digital focus groups and the researcher-moderator role</td>
<td>Digital setting for FGs on Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Qualitative data collection 2a</td>
<td>Political focus groups (German MPs and their employees)</td>
<td>Group transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Qualitative data collection 2b</td>
<td>Lobbyist focus groups (Agency, associations, companies)</td>
<td>Group transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Qualitative data analysis</td>
<td>Two coding rounds (NVivo and manual)</td>
<td>Enriching prototype model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Final analysis and interpretation</td>
<td>Final code, results from two data collection rounds, comparison of two perspectives</td>
<td>Table final code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Model process</td>
<td>Interpretation of the results, including earlier literature analysis</td>
<td>Final process model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This research is centred on the Bundestag, the most important organ of legislative power at federal level in Germany. In Germany, MPs, parliamentary groups (fractions), the government, and the Bundesrat can introduce bills or revise those already in force (Bundestag). This project focused only on MPs and their employees as they symbolise the largest group to lobby, there being 709 parliamentarians, each of whom has about three to five employees.

3.8.1 Pre-Interviews

The researcher started with pre-interviews with known lobbyists and political employees to test the RQs. Since the whole research process is a cyclical act that is rarely perfectly achieved first time, this pre-interview period was particularly important to gain a better understanding of GTM.

While analysing the given answers, the researcher tested whether – and if so, how – to construct an official interview guide. The pre-interviews covered the main topics: definitions, digital communication, transparency, and lobbying success. The main learning was that the interviews should be semi-constructed to enable further dialogues depending on the interviewees (Loosen, 2016). Some of the sample questions that resulted from this pre-interview phase are:

- Has politics changed through the digital transformation, and if so, how?
- Has lobbying changed through digital transformation, and if so, how?
- Do you use social media, and if so, which channel for which content?
- What does “transparent lobbying” mean to you, and where do you see opportunities and risks through digital transformation for it?
- How can the success of lobbying or digital lobbying be measured?

3.8.2 First Data-Gathering Round: Interviews with Lobbyists, Members of the German Bundestag and their employees

As no leading pre-existing theory on digital lobbying in Germany could be reviewed, it was necessary to understand how professionals in lobbying as well as politicians and
their employees see and understand this development. Interviews were therefore chosen as a research method to gain an overview of this new research field. Interviews were the ideal method as it is possible to ask again and clarify aspects in the event of a misunderstanding and to gain a deeper understanding of the field of investigation.

In this thesis, the researcher used a guided interview format as a half-standardised interview form (Loosen, 2016, p. 144). It was important to use a guideline with an ordered question set addressing the main research topic as participants sometimes drift away, especially in a field like politics, where people are communicative and used to talking to and with others. The framework covered the main subject but gave enough room for more questions and topics to be raised during the interview. The researcher made use of these advantages by asking questions when it was difficult to understand exactly what the interviewee meant or when the researcher felt they had more to tell.

The researcher did not always follow the order of her guideline as interviewees answered questions beforehand, skipped to next questions automatically, or included aspects of later questions. As guided interviews can be held face to face, online, or by phone (Loosen, 2016, p. 145), the researcher carried out face-to-face and phone interviews according to the participant’s schedule. The political interviews, in particular, had to be rescheduled several times so phone interviews were simpler to organise for MPs.

Once the researcher finished the preparations for the official interviews, the data-gathering phase started in October 2019. The researcher interviewed until December 2019, until she had the feeling that answers were repeating themselves. The interview dates depended on the participants’ schedules and varied considerably. Consequently, the first collection and analysis phase lasted three months. While finishing the fifteenth interview, the researcher merely focused on working with all transcripts.

Each interview was recorded on the researcher’s phone, after the interviewee had granted permission. Transcript accuracy was ensured by following two steps: the recordings were transcribed with the help of a basic version of the transcription website “meinTranskript.de” first, and then edited shortly after the interview by the researcher. Special features that were not part of the recording, such as external interaction effects,
were not transcribed. Except for these smaller moments, the entire recording was written down verbatim. Unclear passages or grammatically wrong expressions such as duplications of words were sometimes carefully edited by the researcher so the meaning of the statement became clearer. However, the researcher always took special care to not distort the meaning. Wordless sounds such as laughter or sounds made while participants were thinking were also transcribed as “Humm” or “huh”. The following section explains the exact procedure of the interviews and presents an overview of the participants.

3.8.3 Interview Procedure and Participants

The aim of the interviews was to gain an impression of the strategic concepts, digital processes, and traditional lobbying functions that play a role in digital lobbying. The objective therefore was to ask individuals about their perspectives in order to reconstruct those processes and functions or their assumption and result. Even though these processes originate at the level of single actors, they unfold within the context of an organization. Accordingly, statements about strategy or declarations of acceptance revealed important information about the entire organization.

The selection of interviewees reflected the researcher’s intention to talk to both communicating sides: lobbyists as well as parliamentarians and their employees.

Due to the ongoing climate debate in Germany and the EU, the researcher decided to focus on two committees that had come into greater focus and were thus a greater lobbying target, namely the Committee on Transport and Digital Infrastructure and the Committee on Food and Agriculture of the German Bundestag. As only the full members of a committee have voting rights, the researcher requested an academic interview with the MP and their staff through their official email account (which is always: firstname.lastname@bundestag.de). This account is usually checked by the MP’s team. As this thesis aims to analyse changes in lobbying, it was important to not only interview first-time MPs. Asking whole committees for interviews gave the researcher the opportunity to experience a greater variety of mindsets, with different expectations and experiences, than if she had interviewed one group alone.
The researcher also aimed to interview different institutions to represent the lobbyist side: a representative from a lobbying agency, a member of a law firm, and a lobbyist for an association in Berlin. The researcher also captured the lobbyists’ different ages and experience levels. Invitations to participate in the study were sent via email to lobbyists who matched the descriptions. The researcher asked lobbyists whom she had met at political events so that a basic level of trust was established. Those who accepted were included in the sample.

All in all, the researcher conducted fifteen interviews (see Tables 9 and 10): seven with MPs, five with employees in MPs’ offices, and three with lobbyists. Eleven face-to-face interviews in the respective offices as well as four phone interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted about 30 to 60 minutes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nr.</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Political Side</th>
<th>Non-Political Side</th>
<th>Work Years</th>
<th>Form</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>40+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5-</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5-</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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</tr>
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<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>20+</td>
<td></td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>5-</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>30+</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>40+</td>
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<td></td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10: Overview of Sample in Total Numbers (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position/Classification</th>
<th>Total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political sphere</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-political sphere</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of Parliament (MP)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP employees</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP in government</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP in opposition</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 40+</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 40-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience: 10-</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience: 20+</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.8.4 Ethnographic Data and Memos to Challenge Interview Data

The nonpublic nature of lobbying has previously created challenges for researchers in terms of generating reliable data. The conclusion drawn from the literature review was that lobbying must be understood as a communicative action between actors. Consequently, the methodological goal was to get into the field with the actual actors to shadow them. The researcher included ethnographic and autoethnographic data to enrich and challenge this research. Most of the ethnographic notes on which the researcher relied were collected through shadowing. That means, it was considered necessary to not only ask the people involved about the topic but also to observe them.

Thus, the researcher’s experience of working inside the German Bundestag as an employee for an MP complemented the interview material. The researcher “shadowed” an MP during several lobby meetings and for the complete spectrum of his timetable during one session week per month between October 2018 and July 2019. This unique
experience as insider-researcher therefore contributes to understanding both perspectives (political and lobby sides) not only from a theoretical angle but also in the context of practical everyday business.

Reflections about the time the researcher was working in a lobbying agency (2016–2017) as a consultant responsible for preparing lobbying meetings with politicians allow her to observe the “other side” quite extensively. Ethnographic observations were used to challenge the interview guide and, later, the coding process to gain a deeper understanding of the overall research ground. Nevertheless, as the aim was to explore interviewees’ perspectives of the topic, the interviews remain the main analytical focus of this thesis.

Memos are “the crucial intermediate step”, as it helps to write down thoughts that should not be forgotten (Charmaz, 1996, p. 28). Hence, the researcher wrote notes to explain perspectives and comment on the positions and categories that were mentioned. Dating each memo in order to track the evolution of a study is also a part of the process (Saldana, 2009). Following GTM, memos are written until the very end of the research. Although most were written while transcribing the interviews, in fact “memoing” was a continuous activity. Memos vary in form and length according to stage of research project and coding phase. As the researcher began to work with her data more intensively, she also worked with sketches and drawings, which were very helpful in organising codes and sub-codes. The researcher simply wrote down what was going on in her mind, which ultimately helped her move from coding to theory or, rather, model building.

The following are examples of a written memo and sketches from the beginning of 2020.

Written Memo March 2020:

*I notice that the employees I interviewed were a bit insecure in their answers. They thought a lot about their words and asked if it was ok to say it like that. Or also mentioned their boss would explain this or that to me anyways. I thought they said these phrases to get a sign from me on whether what they said was ok or not even though*
almost all of them confirmed to see themselves as “Gatekeepers” for their bosses. I had the impression that their position towards others was trying to be strong – literally like a gatekeeper - but inside, towards their bosses they did not want to make a mistake or be of another opinion.

Sketch March 2020:

![Diagram showing relationships between creation new actors, shifting fields of activity, dissolving the boundaries of lobbying, emerging of digital fields of activity, and reason for existence of classic actors.]

*Figure 18: Sketch March 2020 (Source: Author)*
These sketches were further developed later in the process and found their way into the analysis chapter. An explanation of the development and final version is therefore to be found in section 4.2.2.2. The next step in the research design, after the individual interviews enriched by ethnographic data, was to hold FGs. These are also explained as “simulating ethnographic processes[es] of talk and argumentation” (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 19) and will be explained in more detail in the next sections.

3.8.5 Pre-Focus Groups

Before the actual FGs were conducted, the researcher organised pre-FGs. Friends, family members, and other students were involved to allow the researcher to practice the process, utilise the conference tool Zoom and, more importantly, practice the double
role of researcher-moderator. The researcher trained herself to encourage some participants to contribute more or politely stop those who were dominating, while also focusing on the digital setting.

A main learning for the digital FGs was that, although more structured preparation was necessary, the actual involvement of the researcher-moderator during the digital FGs should be less structured to ensure a more dynamic conversational flow. As the setting can be quite complex, participants need the moderator to create an informal feeling to stimulate the group as a whole. Another learning was that a smaller number of participants was needed for the online FGs as the digital setting would not allow a real discussion with more than five people.

The researcher-moderator also learned to take notes to summarise key points that would be developed during the sessions so that they could be repeated at some point for verification and stimulation of further discussion. For the researcher-moderator, it was easier to note inputs in the digital FGs as only one person spoke at a time (due to small technologically-related audio delays).

### 3.8.6 Second Data-Gathering Round: FG with Lobbyists, Members of the German Bundestag and their employees

The aim of the FGs was to validate the initial interview data and, more precisely, the first impression of digital strategic concepts and processes as well as the continuing traditional lobbying functions that were addressed during the interviews. Thus, all FG participants in this research were selected with the purpose of meeting this particular research focus and both communicating sides were selected according to the theoretical estimate in terms of criteria.

Six of the seven FGs in this research were digital FGs, organised via the videoconferencing software Zoom. Typically, FGs are conducted face to face. Due to Covid-19, physical FGs were nearly impossible in 2020. The researcher was only able to hold one physical FG, with a lobby agency that had a large conference room in which social distancing could be observed (and while working in offices was allowed again in the summer months). The other six FGs were held digitally through live, synchronous
chatroom interactions (Moore et al., 2015), including a camera and a microphone during Zoom discussions.

Fortunately, the emergence of technology had already enabled qualitative research to use online approaches, so digital FGs were the solution to gather participants online (Moore et al., 2015; Reid & Reid, 2005). The following chart shows the groups in chronological order including form, participant number (n=31), and perspective as well as FG duration:

Table 11: Focus Group Overview (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FG</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FG1</td>
<td>30.07.2020</td>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>5 people</td>
<td>Politics 1: Employees</td>
<td>65min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG2</td>
<td>14.08.2020</td>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>4 people</td>
<td>Politics 2: Employees</td>
<td>55min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG3</td>
<td>17.08.2020</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>7 people</td>
<td>Lobbyists 1: Agency</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG4</td>
<td>10.09.2020</td>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>3 people</td>
<td>Politics 1: Members of the German Bundestag</td>
<td>60min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG5</td>
<td>17.09.2020</td>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>4 people</td>
<td>Politics 2: German MPs</td>
<td>80min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG6</td>
<td>23.09.2020</td>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>5 people</td>
<td>Lobbyists 2: Companies</td>
<td>85min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG7</td>
<td>02.10.2020</td>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>3 people</td>
<td>Lobbyists 3: Association</td>
<td>70min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher-moderator prepared a PowerPoint presentation presenting prompts for discussion. The following chart demonstrates the individual points of the presentation and explains the overall structure of all FGs.
### Table 12: Structure of Focus Groups (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>Introduction of moderator and research project + Setting ground rules for discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>Introduction of the participants + room for general questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Phase 3 | Game: lobbyist or activist?  
  → Definition and description of lobbying using pictures of German actors as stimuli  
  → Discussion of current German political and lobby issues through these actors |
| Phase 4 | Presentation of statements that resulted from individual interviews  
  → Discussion of topics and statements  
  → Describing developments and changes |
| Phase 5 | Conclusion by the moderator  
  → Closing; overall comments by participants |

The interviewees mainly signed the consent forms before or directly after the discussions. Then, at the beginning of the FGs, the moderator introduced herself, set the ground rules, and asked all participants to introduce themselves so that a common ground was laid. Then, the subject was discussed in relation to predetermined research stimuli. The moderator started with an introductory game that served as a warm-up and prepared for discussion. The “game” was devised by the researcher-moderator and consisted of pictures of very different interest groups in Berlin that were shown as stimuli to slowly start a discussion. The pictures included well-known lobbying companies, new movements, NGOs, and activist groups. The participants were asked to leave the microphone on throughout “the game” so that they could answer intuitively and quickly whether the shown actor was a lobbyist or not. Everyone was allowed to describe what they thought and why they labelled the picture a lobbyist, activist, or neither. Through these answers, participants revealed their personal understanding of what (digital) lobbying was and was not, and the boundary between it and other disciplines. The introduction game automatically dealt with defining lobbying and how participants would see different (lobbying) actors. Through all the different views, participants automatically started to discuss different “lobbying” and “non-lobbying” situations. Another aspect of the discussion was the definition of digital transformation.
and which media were included in “digital”, for example cell phones, emails, or social media.

The warm-up game was important to lay the ground for the discussion of how lobbying was or was not affected by digital transformation. For the discussion, the moderator then introduced the results of the first data round in the form of statements, which were discussed. The researcher-moderator presented (opposing) opinions to challenge the participants with the results of the first interview round. The slides started the discussion, as individuals modified their position, or defended or added to it. By bringing all the comments together, it was possible to determine whether perspectives, views, and opinions changed in the course of the discussion. These will be presented in the coding cycles.

At the end, the moderator concluded with a general explanation of the results and invited the participants to join in a closing round of final comments on their overall perspective. A closing question asked during the FGs was: “Now, after all comments, how do you think digital transformation impacts lobbying communication?” Some participants stayed longer than others to offer further comments so another discussion was undertaken (in the company lobby FG) on the question: “How do you think social media can be used to reach the goals described?” An intense examination of the transcripts revealed several contributions that are demonstrated in Section 4.3.1.

Since the literature recommends that a note-taker helps to write down the speaking order to facilitate later transcription (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 6), a note-taker helped the moderator-researcher in the physical FG. Not only was this important as it was the largest group in terms of participant numbers, but the researcher had also noted when transcribing the first digital FG audios that keeping track of who is speaking and when is essential to the transcription process. For the researcher-moderator, it was easier to note inputs in the digital FGs as only one person spoke at a time (due to small technologically-related audio delays).

The discussions were recorded, and the audio files were transcribed with the help of the software “MeinTranskript” (https://meintranskript.de). However, the software was only a basic support. Most sentences were transcribed without punctuation, for example. The
support was used only because the large amount of data would have taken too long to type manually. The researcher agrees with scholars of the opinion that transcribing is a very important step in the process of analysing the data in several rounds and that first memos should be created (Rabiee, 2004). Consequently, the researcher ensured the transcripts’ accuracy by looking for special features that were not transcribed or interaction effects. As with the interview transcripts, the entire recording was written down verbatim. Only those passages which were unclear due to simultaneous communication or grammatically wrong expressions, such as duplications of words, were carefully edited by the researcher. Nevertheless, the researcher always took special care not to distort the meaning. Wordless sounds like laughter or sounds while participants were thinking were also transcribed as “Humm” or “huh”.

All seven FGs were analysed with the help of NVivo. Memos and part of the axial and selective coding phases were created manually with cards, post-its, and large sheets of paper. Findings from the NVivo open coding helped to further develop the different categories and dimensions and their relationships with each other as the software enables the researcher to see all focus group transcripts together, switch codes around, or search for words and sections.

Before Chapter 4 presents the coding process in more detail and explains the overall results, the next section looks more closely at the procedure for finding participants.

### 3.8.7 FG Procedures and Participants

The researcher asked about 350 selected people to participate via email or LinkedIn until about 35 professionals from the political and lobbying sides agreed. In the end, 31 people successfully scheduled a date and participated in one of the FGs that took place between the end of July and the beginning of October 2020. The high number of participants with tight schedules led to difficulties finding a common date, so the political FGs had to be split. Consequently, fewer people participated in each group, as the figure below demonstrates (each group is marked by a colour). The following charts show all FG participants who were sampled via theoretical sampling in 2020.
### Four Digital Political Zoom Conferences

**Table 13: Participants in Political Focus Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nr.</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>Empl.</th>
<th>Political Side</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Years of Exp.</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Govt</td>
<td>Oppos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Legisl. Peri.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>24 / 2 LP</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>39</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>19 / 2 LP</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>52</td>
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<td>15 / 1 LP</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>30</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Three Lobby Focus Groups – Digital (D) and Physical (Ph)

Table 14: Participants in Lobbying Focus Group (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nr.</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>Ph</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Years of Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>56</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>19,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The idea of this second interview phase was to select different participants from those who took part in the first interview phase but belonged to the same three groups: lobbyists, and German MPs and their employees. In accordance with the needs of the research, the participants were sought and selected according to criteria of diversity in gender, political perspectives (parties and, in general, opposition or government), age (habit of using social media and new settings), and total work experience (comparison between now and then; change).

The theoretical recommendations concerning the number of participants were followed by there being seven participants in the physical FG with agency lobbyists. With the traditional frame of five to twelve participants, it would be difficult to conduct the sessions in less than one hour and a half as in digital FGs, the speaking time is more
limited. Since most participants could only offer one hour maximum, the researcher-moderator had to stick to the schedule. Reducing the number of participants for digital FGs gave everyone enough time to respond without any rush, and the group was still able to develop group discussions throughout the sessions. Hence, the minimum number for the conducted online FGs was three participants and the maximum number was five.

Furthermore, it is important to bear participants’ relationships in mind: Do they know each other? If yes, how well? Are they strangers? Are they of mixed genders? (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 6). The agency lobbyists’ FG was the only FG conducted in a setting where it was already clear that all participants knew each other well from working together. The researcher selected all other participants due to their role or comity affiliation in the German Bundestag, without any apparent indications on their relationship to each other. The FG with members of the German Bundestag included two colleagues from the same political party who were expected to know each other. This connection did not disturb the group interaction as the additional participants were also confident and, as members of the government, are used to inter-political discussions. It should be mentioned that one party participated in both FGs and thereby added more input than other parties in the FG phase. The explanation is that their particular policy agenda on digital transformation reflects the invitation to participate in this particular research project.

3.8.8 Between FGs: Content Development

Even though each FG is unique and develops different dynamics, topics, and discourses as well as theoretical relations between identities (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996), adjusted conversational interviewing is a classic GT approach that has shown very effective results (Glaser, 1978, 1998), as in this study. The FG content was updated and further developed between the groups along lines of criticisms and common resolutions so that immediate feedback and the first analytic outcomes of the new data could be integrated directly for the following FGs. For example, in the first lobbying FG, statements were updated that included comments and recommendations from the political perspective. This contextual update included more details, so the initial four statements to discuss resulted in a total of six statements to be more precise. Furthermore, they were
formulated for both perspectives, political and lobbying. Consequently, it can be said that each discussion clearly led to more details and awareness of the overall perspective.

3.9 Summary

The thesis is based on a qualitative perspective and exploratory in nature. The chosen methodology to investigate the research question is GTM. This open-minded approach recognises the studied phenomena holistically and discovers new categories. GTM further allows the researcher to include all communicating sides leading to new impulses for a theoretical contribution to research. The procedures given by Strauss and Corbin form the basis for this thesis, while the practical background of the researcher demands a combination of aspects of constructive GTM given by Charmaz. The chosen research design includes interviews as first data source and FGs as second. Both data rounds were done on both communicating sides. In order to include the researcher’s working experiences as well, an enriching ethnographic touch is added. Thus, the interview results were challenged through the researcher’s ethnographic data. The findings served as a discussion document in the (digital) FGs to verify and further develop these first findings. A pre-model was created. The setting and all including aspects led to a constructivist paradigm with an interpretivist stance. The following chapters, therefore, explain in more detail how this research approach is applied and what resulted from it.
4 Findings and Analysis

To analyse and translate raw data to new knowledge and findings GTM was chosen. An asset in GTM is collecting and analysing data simultaneously. Analysis is thereby described as a relational interplay between the researchers of a study and their data, “capturing the dynamic flow of events and the complex nature of relationships”, and goes back to the founders of GT, Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 129). When generated data is evaluated, in particular, the interpretation process entails some degree of personal knowledge or knowhow (Rabiee, 2004, p. 657). The possibility of human interpretation might equally be criticised as a disadvantage, especially in a field that is still being discovered, such as digital lobbying within the German context. To conceptualise the interviews and FGs, the researcher analysed the content and brought it together in a new way (A. Strauss & Corbin, 2010). NVivo helped the researcher with coding but she carried out the analysis herself, using the results demonstrated by the program as well as her own experiences. The process of analysis and the collection of multiple studies or constant comparison with the studies of other researchers has significant implications for the development of theory.

4.1 Introduction to the Findings and Analysis

The interview coding process was divided into two parts, manual and software. For the interviews, the first coding phase was carried out manually, while the second phase was supported by the software package NVivo. For the FGs, the researcher started with NVivo and only applied manual coding for the axial coding phase. NVivo helped to ensure greater efficiency and allowed ideas to be stored more flexibly. The software organises and manages all thoughts very well and helped the researcher to easily push codes around, re-group them when she felt she had to do so, and reconfigure her data according to her reflections.

Additionally, the researcher used her knowledge and intuition, based on her working experience, to determine data that “looked alike” and automatically knew which codes “to group” and which to leave on the same level (Saldaña, 2015, p. 9).
The interviews were further challenged by ethnographic data drawn from the researcher’s experience. The discussed arguments and experiences are integrated in the interview analysis chapters.

The following two sections describe how the researcher proceeded in the different coding rounds in more detail.

4.2 First Data-Gathering Round

The first data-gathering round encompassed the following steps:
Table 15: Overview of First Data-Gathering Round (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Conducting interviews</td>
<td>Half-standardised interviews (n=15)</td>
<td>Interview transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/2019-12/2019</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Manual analysis</td>
<td>Coding: open coding (in-vivo, line-by-line), axial coding (sub-codes and main codes)</td>
<td>Sentiments towards lobbying (4.2.1.1), awareness of digital lobbying (4.2.1.2), transparency as tool and attitude (4.2.1.3), perception of lobbying success (4.2.1.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/2019-01/2020</td>
<td>Memoing: while conducting interviews, transcription</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analytic induction: systematic examination of similarities between actors and similarities to other cases in literature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 NVivo analysis</td>
<td>Open coding: validate manual open codes</td>
<td>Context (4.2.2.1), digital communication as engine (4.2.2.2), new contact field (4.2.2.3), schism between old and new (4.2.2.4), transparency (4.2.2.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/2020-04/2020</td>
<td>Axial coding: paradigmatic model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selective coding: final code (&quot;strategy&quot;)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Ethnography analysis (in parallel)</td>
<td>Ethnographic data to challenge interview guide, interview results and the coding process</td>
<td>Interview guide, final codes, manual analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Pre-model design</td>
<td>Grounded theory methodology: final codes in relation to each other, added by arrows and hierarchy</td>
<td>Pre-model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04/2020</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher first transcribed the interviews, which were about 1000-5500 words long, and then analysed each individually. The researcher broke each interview question...
down independently as each conversation led to different developments and answer dynamics throughout the meetings.

A broad coding phase was important for further steps as it gave an initial indication of the overall status of the topic.

The following sections explain the analytical procedures and findings from the interview phase in more detail. The first part presents the initial codes and summarises the manual coding results in preparation for the second NVivo coding phase and overall interview outcomes.

4.2.1 Manual Coding Phase

The researcher did the first open coding round manually, staying close to the texts and keeping codes simple. This first step included many in-vivo codes and, later, several more detailed codes as she went through the interviews line by line. Throughout this first phase, the researcher continued to collect data and switched several times between interviewing, going through the interviews, transcribing, memoing, translating, and coding. It was very challenging doing everything in parallel but an important part of the process, which is described in GTM as a period that is not always linear (Charmaz, 2006, p. 58).

The researcher found it helpful to divide the interviews into sections, as it felt easier to look at individual questions first and focus on them for a while. Thereby, the researcher focused principally on sentiments and went through the interviews line by line to see whether the underlying meaning was positive or negative (Saldaña, 2015, p. 105). During and directly after the interviews, the researcher had the impression that underlying sentiments were quite dominant and did not match the core statements. Therefore, the researcher focused on the distinction between positive and negative sentiments on lobbying and digital transformation. In the open coding phase, the researcher merely coded, without thinking about connections between the different codes. Focusing on the transcripts revealed many insights in the given answers and exposed many different opinions of the participants. (One publication has derived from these findings.)
This section presents the open coded and final manual coding systems. Among the various indices proposed in literature, the researcher employed manual coding first, which is considered a valid measure in qualitative research (Saldana, 2009). Table 16 demonstrates the main codes and sub-codes that resulted from the first manual coding procedure.

Table 16: Overview of Codes and Sub-Codes of the Manual Coding Phase (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sub-Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentiment</td>
<td>Positive impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of digital lobbying</td>
<td>Has an understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Has no understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>More transparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less transparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying Success</td>
<td>Successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsuccessful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The presented four codes are explained further in the next sections.

4.2.1.1 Interviewees' Perceptions of Lobbying as a Practice

The interviews confirm an entire sentiment spectrum on lobbying. When actively asked for a lobbying definition, many participants included legitimate (Interview 9, Interview 14) as a defence of the business. This wording confirms awareness that the field is rather negatively connotated. Interest representation was also differentiated as not critical and lobbying as negative even though it actually had the same meaning, as the following quote shows.

Well, I separate lobbying from interest representation. Representation of interests is when I explicitly say what would be important for me from my point of view and put it into an overall context. Lobbying is – I try to get someone to represent my interests with hidden or open means. And that is why lobbying is problematic for me, representation
of interests is not – I need it. I need to know what other people affected by the laws think about it. That’s why I think representation of interests is perfectly fine, it just has to be transparent and lobbying is often an attempt to manipulate someone, so to speak, so only to provide them with information that is positive in their own interest. (Interview 5)

This view is shared by another politician using the term “PR”, who says:

*I often don’t see it as lobbying at all, but more as PR.* (Interview 15)

Although most of the interviewees defined lobbying as positive at first, their perceptions became more critical later on. In fact, some used negative attributes or clichés to talk about the practice.

*Yes, I think the term itself is always directed at these backroom conversations, where people in the non-public make sure that the influence that not everyone should know about happens.* (Interview 10)

Some politicians in the sample even associated the practice with far worse scenarios.

*But then to accept the fact that, so to speak, completely concealed networks are emerging which can also blackmail us, as politicians, plus large slaughter groups, three large food trading companies which determine, let’s say, what goes on here in the state, and politicians can only say: “Yes, please, please.” That is a catastrophe. And that, of course, has something to do with lobbying, because their interests suddenly play a completely different role. Because they are the economic players, and they are sitting at control points where you no longer have any alternative.* (Interview 5)

And:

*Yes, you can recognise it by the voting behaviour. Because there are drafts of motions or changes in the law that would make more sense otherwise, but then you notice that there is more money behind the way it is actually done.* (Interview 6)
Based on the ethnographic research, the researcher noticed that politicians had a positive working attitude towards lobbyists if their request fell within their political perspective. The researcher also noticed a remarkable difference in the actual number of lobbying requests between members of the opposition and governing parties. Based on insider knowledge, it is suggested that opposition politicians are naturally less likely to be lobbied; hence, they also have less working experience of lobbying. The same applies to politicians working in committees which attract less public interest. The researcher noticed that politicians without frequent contact with lobbyists relied more on clichés than those who worked with lobbyists regularly.

Another finding from the ethnographic notes was confirmed, namely negative sentiments towards lobbyists due to their intermediary function. When someone is personally concerned in the matter and addresses a politician directly, they are perceived more positively than an intermediary representing a third party who is sometimes not even present. The researcher has seen lobbyists use this situation by bringing clients along to their political appointments. One lobbyist explained his strategy in the interviews and mentioned this aspect:

We talk to all stakeholders. We try to form alliances – and then we approach politicians, talk to them, in an ideal situation, this already helps. We always have the client with us during the appointments. So, we don’t do it without the client. (Interview 12)

This phenomenon was confirmed by a politician who said that he did not have any problem when someone would, for example, state their request directly:

I am with the foresters, and they chose me to come here and represent their opinion and my own [...] and we have a problem. Can you help us? (Interview 6)

The above indicates that when one openly communicates one’s position, background, and goals, it is more positively viewed by the politicians. However, overall, opposition politicians were still more likely to be critical of lobbying per se. The lobbyists interviewed were aware that their work was negatively connotated and tried to defend their job by including the adjectives “legitimate” or “neutral” when defining it:
Lobbying is the legitimate representation of interests of individuals and organizations to political decision-makers in the ministerial and parliamentary spheres. (Interview 14)

Relatively boring and neutral, simply that one tries to enforce political interests. So, there is a representation of interests, and that is a representation of interests to politics. And that’s in relation to politics because you need politics to make something happen. [...] Yes, so I would say, seen that way, completely neutral, it is a political representation of interests. (Interview 13)

All in all, the sentiments demonstrated through the interviews seem extreme. The arguments are very black or white and differentiate little. It is desirable to include more categories alongside “critical”. This strong categorization of sentiments reveals how deeply affected the business and field is by preconceptions. Clearly, only more information about and knowledge of lobbying can lead to clarity and a more differentiated view.

4.2.1.2 Knowledge and Awareness of Digital Lobbying

Even when interviewees were hesitant to define digital lobbying, their understanding of the concept emerged from the discussion. Most participants were, however, not able to structure and categorize their experience in concrete examples, as the following quotes indicate.

Yes, I don’t know. Humm... I think the line between information and lobbying is more difficult to draw because you usually receive digital information or invitations to meetings. I don’t know if it is really tangible in this form. So, of course, one can do lobbying in the digital area, that is, via the digital medium. Usually, it is more the establishing of contact, and then I think it becomes a lobbying discussion in the concrete event because I think it’s too impersonal to do direct lobbying via digital media. (Interview 10)

This perspective was shared by a participant who said:
The whole thing via email. [...] More enquiries come in digitally. (Interview 11)

The lobbyists were also quite diverse in their answers. The oldest, with most experience, referred to digital lobbying as:

 [...] simply adding social media as a channel, no more and no less. (Interview 14)

The two younger lobbyists had a very clear understanding of the potential that data could provide in addressing politicians. However, as one of the interviewees confessed, such things did not happen yet in Germany, only in the USA. Their definitions were:

Good question. [...] I thought like: oh, crazy! AI, Big Data, and Co. now regarding lobbyists, that’s interesting. And then I realised that it’s actually different these days because somehow, they say: Do you use Twitter and Facebook for lobbying work? And I thought to myself, hmmm... Digital Humhumhum is not Facebook and Twitter. It just means working differently. To be able to work better or simply more efficiently or whatever. It just surprised me that it was about communication. Now lobbying is also about communication, but at the beginning, I thought about digital lobbying. In Digital Public Affairs, we use data analysis and stuff like that. (Interview 13)

And also:

Yes, difficult, there are completely different approaches. [...] Well, I’ll say everything with a publicity effect on the internet to spread your political messages to politicians. I could also do that with certain paid content; I can work towards certain target groups. For example, politicians at some level, seeing my messages more than any other people or other messages. That would be one possibility. It’s also very much about the public sphere. (Interview 12)

A change in the field is recognised by the lobbying side, where digital opportunities are identified as practical activities, such as using social media as a lobbying tool, creating emotions online, and using the public digitally to reach stakeholders. The political side also mentioned social media in the context of their work for direct or widespread communication, which shows that there is a general awareness of its importance.
Surprisingly, no political participant mentioned anything about data or being targeted more than others. Even when one employee checked his boss’s Facebook page during the interview and found proof that the politician was actually involved in digital targeting strategies, he still denied that it was happening to the politician:

*I have now taken a look at the Facebook page. What I just noticed on Facebook, the “ProBahn” (pro-German railway association) here from the region, regularly links us to their Facebook and then expects us to react to it. But that’s normal Facebook work; I wouldn’t describe that as lobbying.* (Interview 8)

The above quote reveals the surface understanding of digital communication possibilities such as mobilization and emotionalization. Even though the employee understands the crucial difference between classic and digital lobbying and what it can do to politics in terms of policymaking, he could not see how he was affected by it. Another politician also denied that such developments were happening in Germany, explaining:

*Well, but that’s really... we don’t have anything to do with such big lobbyists in Germany. There we are, the German Bundestag, with our ass too far down. [...] It will go to Brussels or to America...* (Interview 6)

More often, the political side mentioned the negative consequences of the greater speed inherent in digital communication channels:

*Processes have become much faster, an enormous acceleration of communication. Sometimes too fast. There is too little room to weigh things up, too much pressure to react immediately to everyone involved. It may not have changed for the better.* (Interview 3)

During the researcher’s ethnographic fieldwork, she noticed that, in particular, politicians who were already using social media before entering the German Bundestag made more active use of digital channels to demonstrate their work in parliament. They were responsible for their own social media posts and were mostly not discouraged by
the speed. MPs whose social media posts were constructed by their employees made more comments about the time pressure of this new working field.

In short, it seems as if there is a discrepancy between superficial meanings and profound knowledge of the core activities of digital lobbying, particularly on the political side. Figure 17 summarises how the political side perceives the theoretical and practical realization of lobbying and digital lobbying. The first line demonstrates the initial but surface perception, and the second line demonstrates how the examples came to be perceived later in the interviews.

Table 17: Sentiment Overview of the Political Side (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surface</th>
<th>Example lobbying</th>
<th>Example digital lobbying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theoretical legitimization of lobbying as a democratic tool: positive</td>
<td>Theoretical knowledge of digital lobbying: positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlaying/Core</td>
<td>Practical realization of lobbying as a democratic tool: negative</td>
<td>Practical knowledge of digital lobbying: negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.1.3 Role of Transparency: Tool or Attitude?

The statements in this category were clear: Digital transformation is seen as a chance to make lobbying more transparent. The majority of interviewees believe lobbying becomes more transparent through digital transformation. However, during the interviews, several concerns were mentioned and helped to reveal another underlying attitude. The following data extracts demonstrate the diversity of opinions regarding transparency through digital transformation.

- …anonymization, which also takes place through digital transformation… (Interview 5)
- Well, I would say it is even more difficult because it is even more covert and often gives the impression that it comes from “social media” and has a “social” context. You have to be very careful here because the sources are often not clearly recognizable. (Interview 5)
• Digital transformation is rather risky. In my opinion, this is to hide things because in the digital world it’s possible. Sometimes I explain it by the adoption of different profiles, a variety of profiles. I don’t want to say fake profiles but that I have to do research first to analyse whether they are real and or not… (Interview 1)

There was also a more overarching explanation from the lobbying side.

I just noticed that ten years ago everyone still thought “Great, the internet and even social media democratises everything. Access to information and knowledge. Everyone can talk to everyone, and we all get a lot more information, and then we can all form a better opinion. […] And at the moment you actually get the feeling that people think “No, that doesn’t lead to a better, informed discourse, it actually poisons the discourse.” (Interview 13)

Looking more closely at the answers and comments reveals that phenomena such as anonymization and fake profiles contradict transparency. These comments countered the researcher’s first impression that many interviewees had the simple assumption that just because something is posted online, it is therefore transparent. Nevertheless, only one MP actively questioned whether digital transformation was really a chance for more transparency, finalising his thoughts by saying:

In my opinion, digital transformation therefore poses more risk of concealing [transparency]. (Interview 1)

However, politicians, employees, and lobbyists agreed that it was not enough to simply publish, for example, the names of participants, meeting dates, legislation texts, etc. as that would be too much information (Interview 13). To them, transparency should, rather, be an educational aspect (Interview 13) and a higher culture of political co-determination (Interview 10), entailing provision of more profound information, especially on how the legislative process works. One employee and a lobbyist agreed that to date it is not directly [the lobbyists’] responsibility... (Interview 10) and asked: ...is that rather an obligation of lobbyists or politicians? (Interview 13)
The researcher’s field notes also reveal these instances as “political opportune thinking” as they concern situations in which politicians make information public when it enhances their image. Thus, during the researcher’s fieldwork, she experienced transparency more as a tool than an attitude. Many politicians hire a social media manager in the team to support them with their social media profile. These communication channels should make the public feel as if they were “shadowing” a politician. The difference is that it is the parliamentarian who decides what is being published and filters the images to achieve the appearance of perfection.

4.2.1.4 Perceptions of Lobbying Success

The discussion of lobbying success was strongly framed in terms of power as it is suggested it influences the legislative process. Overall, lobbying success was described as being “difficult to measure” (Interviews 8, 11, 12, 13, 15). Only one lobbyist from the sample believed their work to be measurable, saying:

*Lobbying activities focus on very concrete changes in legislation. They are either achieved or not achieved. Period. That’s a given point. (Interview 14)*

This answer was given by the owner of an agency, who argued that one needs to justify the work to one’s clients. The other two lobbyists attached less importance to success, explaining that it is possible to succeed even if a lobbyist sometimes delivers poor work. Furthermore, even if one delivers the best work and dedicates a great deal of energy to a piece of legislation over a long period of time, it might not be successful due to other, undefined factors.

*In the end, you never know what exactly a legislative change is based on. It is never understandable that it is based exactly on the arguments of interest representative XY. That’s what makes it so difficult. [...] So, one thing that is very well measurable, is the activity. But as a lobbyist, I can really do anything within the possible scope...Do the perfect job and still simply have no impact on the process – and this might be for completely different reasons. (Interview 12)*

And also:
Then it may be a success, but it may not be my success causally. Nothing might have happened not because of me, but just because nothing happened. Imagine I am a lobbyist in the waste industry and nothing happens in the field for a year... no new regulation or anything... yes, was I successful? I think that is difficult to measure. (Interview 13)

On the political side, attention was driven towards personal trust and the “good old ways”, as Table 18 demonstrates.

**Table 18: Code Lobbying Success Examples (Source: Author)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>Employee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, uh, digital transformation is important, please don’t misunderstand, but I believe in politics it is important, very important, to have personal conversations, the personal appearance, in front of voters, in front of colleagues, also in front of colleagues from other fractions. Conversations are very important, and a personal conversation can never be replaced by a digital medium. (Interview 6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the problem is, with lobbying it is important that there is personal contact and this is virtually not possible. Because the most important currency in politics is trust. (Interview 4)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can exchange ten emails with a politician, but this will never replace one lunch. (Interview 9)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher argues that for the political side, lobbying success was often dependent upon personal conversations rather than the use of digital tools. The researcher noticed that politicians interpreted personal meetings as an indication that they were appreciated. The conclusion of a personal conversation was mostly a concrete to-do list for the employees who also attended the meetings. These tasks were then quickly accomplished, which was not necessarily the case when digital requests came in. This
kind of request was often postponed and sometimes not taken seriously. The non-digital way of lobbying seems to be more successful than new digital strategies. At the same time, the presented quotes indicate that the interviewees see and feel a change is happening in lobbying due to digital transformation.

*Politics has absolutely changed through digital transformation because society has changed through digital transformation, and politics mirrors society. (Interview 1)*

### 4.2.1.5 Results of the First Coding Phase

In the first open coding phase, the researcher stayed as open as possible and, still, the given answers generated very strong categories. The main codes to review were *digital lobbying* and *transparency* because they were still not specific enough and required breaking down into more sub-codes. It was also necessary to further review *digital communication tools* and *social media* in order to gain more insights into how they are connected to the previous codes. The first findings indicated that *digital communication* and *social media* are important for *transparency*, and that *political aspects* have to be analysed more intensively. Also, *political perspectives* have to be analysed further in the context of the lobbyists’ positions. The first coding phase mainly described overall positions and impressions. The next coding phase went on to look more closely into these first findings and find connections between the different codes. Consequently, the researcher summarised her thoughts about possible connections between the main codes as follows.

1. There are different perspectives on digital lobbying and communication channels depending on the participant’s position. It is necessary to explore further which position leads to which perspective and if patterns can be detected.

2. Statements in interviews with politicians and their employees revealed how they portrayed themselves digitally with a stronger focus on using transparency as a tool than practicing it as an attitude. It would be interesting to explore transparency a little further to see whether presenting procedures to the public are only driven by reputation benefits, or if transparency in terms of a democratic culture is the real reason. Connected with these thoughts is the question of whether digital lobbying offers a chance for more transparency or creates a digital black box for lobbying.
3. Moreover, almost all participants talked about digital communication and social media in connection to digital lobbying. It was therefore necessary to look more deeply at the consequences of social media to lobbying and the two communicating sides.

4.2.2 NVivo Coding Phase

The second coding phase was much more specific. By using the software NVivo, the researcher was able to code in more detail as the program allowed her to be more flexible in her thoughts. The researcher went through the data and the codes from the first coding phase several times and tried to determine their adequacy (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). It took quite some time to go through them again as the researcher tried to focus on other, novel aspects. The system allowed her to create many new codes and sub-codes within it. While comparing the data intensively, she was also able to recode parts. In fact, a significant part of the second coding phase involved comparing codes.

It is difficult to differentiate between individual coding rounds in NVivo but one thing was crucial in this second coding phase: The researcher changed the starting point in her mind. She decided that according to the overall RQ, the removal of the boundaries of lobbying and its area of activity had to be the new focus. Thus, the researcher reorganized codes within second order codes and created new third order codes. Axial coding helped to carry this concept forward. The researcher sorted all codes and created more specific ones. One example is the code actors. Here, the researcher had to go through her data again to specify related codes in relation to the overall idea. Another example is the code social media, which had not differentiated between the personal action using it and its political outcome. Only in the second phase did the researcher notice the relationship between the political use of social media and the resulting changing field of activity. Furthermore, the code change also had to be divided to put it in relation to the phenomenon itself and the consequences. So, changing the strategy for the axial coding phase and recoding relevant parts allowed the researcher to better understand connections between the changing fields that many participants mentioned. In Charmaz’s words, the researcher coded for what participants do in lobbying, how they do it, why they do it, and what outcome it had (Charmaz, 2006, p. 62).
The researcher also used the paradigmatic model in the axial coding round, as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (2010). Following the model means sorting codes according to their (a) causal condition, (b) phenomena, (c) context, (d) intervening conditions, (e) strategies, and (f) consequences (A. Strauss & Corbin, 2010, pp. 78, 79). Carrying out this sorting greatly helped the researcher to approach the central phenomenon, while NVivo was most helpful in simultaneously coding and changing the coding levels.

During this phase, the researcher drew many sketches which helped her sort her thoughts and separate her ideas and perspectives. By questioning herself at this point in the research, the researcher was able to integrate the codes around the central idea. During this round, axial and selective coding overlapped considerably. During the coding process, the researcher made the most significant achievements in axial coding after connecting the RQs to the codes. Focusing on the crucial points and their connection was a very important step. The researcher integrated results from the first analysis in the overall research process. The relationships guided her to the core categories of the interviews and, thereby, she was able to develop the story further, which is, in turn, important in describing the developing theoretical aspects (A. Strauss & Corbin, 2010, pp. 96, 97).

The final codes are shown in the table below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Main Codes</th>
<th>Final Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Change in Influence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Transformation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Media Channels</td>
<td>Digital Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>Context</td>
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<td>Facebook</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Aspects</td>
<td>Politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Perspectives</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Sentiment</td>
<td>Sentiments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Sentiment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Lobby Actor</td>
<td>Actors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact Field</td>
<td>Political Actor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Actor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Interest</td>
<td>Information and</td>
<td>Input</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Good Interest</td>
<td>Communication Result</td>
<td>Output</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Success</td>
<td>Process Result</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>Classic Lobbying</td>
<td>Schism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Possibilities DL</td>
<td>Digital Lobbying (DL)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Range</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agenda Setter</td>
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<tr>
<td>AI</td>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td>Digital Tools</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Data</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Algorithm</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Analogue Tools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparency Register</td>
<td>Increasing Transparency</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Decreasing Transparency</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Looking more deeply at the first findings, the researcher specifically focused on certain codes in the second coding phase that remained unfinished. The researcher also tried to combine several smaller codes into an overall meaning, as presented in the next sections.
4.2.2.1 Understanding the Context Matters

A new first-level code was important to organise the mentioned lobbying surroundings. The researcher felt it was necessary to separate these surroundings in a first-level code after running the two codes transparency and change together in NVivo as she had first thought that transparency was also part of the context. The combination demonstrated specific advantages for many participants (Interviews 6, 7, 10, 12, 13).

- Lobbying is more comprehensible in the public sphere. (Interview 12)
- The political side is accountable for what it does, with whom they talk very often, where impulses come from. (Interview 12)
- Who lobbyists are or for what kind of agencies they work for. (Interview 12)
- It is the accuracy and quality, yes, who represents what and whom. (Interview 6)
- Verify the information provided. (Interview 7)
- There are now simpler ways of visualising from a mass of information. (Interview 13)
- Well-organised homepage and a professional appearance. (Interview 10)
- In any case, the trend goes towards more publicity and that is created mainly by the digital space. (Interview 12)

Looking more closely at the advantages that were labelled as both a segment of transparency and a symbol of change showed the researcher that they belong in different categories, and that the code transparency was not part of the code context (or of output but, rather, a standalone first-level code, as explained further in Section 4.2.2.5). Of course, all these quotes touched the setting at some point, but they were still too confusing and showed the researcher that there was more to it. Therefore, the researcher summarised the sub-codes change, digital communication, politics, and sentiments as the overall code context. Participants revealed that lobbying finds itself in a complex political setting, which is changing through digital communication. The researcher also included the previously identified sentiments that were analysed in the first coding round, as they shape the context as well. As for sentiments, the researcher did not change the code in the second analysis as it was depleted. The resulting code was an important finding for the overall analysis so the researcher took it from the first round and included it in context.
All participants talked about or described change, whether in a very abstract or very concrete way, in terms of digital transformation and its consequences. The following quote indicates both abstract classifications and concrete changes.

*In any case, there have been changes. I probably haven’t been here long enough to be able to prove them substantively. But inevitably, society or everyday perceptions of many things has changed...whether it’s media consumption, whether it’s information exchange, whether it’s somehow a set of values in the world and also to look at the world in a global context somehow, all this is of course reflected in politics. I think that everything in politics seems like it has to be short-term, everything even faster, decisions have to be made extremely quickly because you always have to be the first to comment on it publicly because the attention span for topics is very small. So, one then approaches everything very strategically and does not necessarily take the time that solutions sometimes need. Or to the extent that one can maintain a topic which is important. So, in the context of social media, there has been an extreme amount of change. I also believe that as far as the independence of individual politicians from parties is concerned, one can position oneself much better as an individual by using one’s own channels and not being dependent on the organizational structure that is behind the press work. Of course, the classical medium ... still works, most importantly, I believe in the political sphere. But nowadays there are ways to break out of it. And I think that has influenced the climate of politicians and the political climate. (Interview 10)*

Analysis also entails paraphrasing coding parts and comparing results thematically. From the codes that resulted, the researcher took informative raw quotations like the one above and challenged them again. The researcher also exported more passages that did not contain catchy phrases or topics. Going through these passages again was important to find more certainty and reduce the complexity in some interviews. Therefore, the code *digital communication* arose as another factor in the overall context. It is important to say that even though one could argue that digital communication is a result of change through digital transformation, the final coding tree holds it as a parallel sub-code to *change in influence*. The reason is that change is explained as an abstract surrounding by most participants, and digital communication is directly
responsible for the change in influence or, rather, includes a new setting for all actors. The next section explains this new context in terms of digital communication.

4.2.2.2  Digital Communication as an Engine that Powers and Filters the System

Through the use of digital communication, the communication system for lobbying changes and becomes larger. The larger system not only influences former functionalities, but digital communication also becomes a central part of the system and its strategies. The concept is shown in Table 19, below, and then described.

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Figure 20: Digital Communication Circle (Source: Author)
Starting with the lobby actor, each has a certain individual interest. Through digital communication, this input is not directly passed to the political actor, as previously happened. Digital communication brings new strategies and thereby changes old functionalities. Participants described, for example, how “range” in the digital world involves the public and can thereby lead to powerful agenda setting:

*I have a relatively large number of posts and also have comments under articles, in other words what is commonly referred to as “making a topic” on the internet or “creating a mood” ... (Interview 1)*

One participant even said almost competing that such increased influence might lead towards more public acceptance:

...range leads towards generating more influence. But that also means that personalities who are actors, so to speak, or who can market themselves very well can of course also perform disproportionately well in the perception of voters. (Interview 4)

Through this new “circle of communication” between the possible channels, the input can be debated publicly before it reaches the political actor. The analysis of this circle showed that even though not all participants were fully aware of the potential, the engine that powers the system lies exactly there and changes former strategies. It is not only lobbying that causes input to enter the circle. When a political actor addresses the public, the received input from the political side also does. The political side is aware of this, as demonstrated in the following quote.

*I think one always has to try to gain range with very good content. And the goal of a politician in the digital age must be to have range and overcome superficiality. (Interview 4)*

Superficiality is to be understood as one of the risks of digital communication. The communication circle gives lobby actors certain inputs about the ongoing situation and thus influences their subsequent steps. The actors have different target groups when communicating digitally. Political participants try to reach their electorate with arguments for the common good (at least for their constituency), and lobbyists talked
about ultimately reaching policymakers, whether through their electorates or the general public. However, here the strategy has to include the public in their argumentation. When the final output reaches the political actor, it is to be understood as a result that can stand for a lobby success from the perspective of the lobby actor or, from the political perspective, an achievement for the policymaker (including a personal achievement) and thus, ideally for the common good. When individual interests are transferred into the political world, they are adapted to the common good. Hereby, digital communication plays a major role as it filters one-sided interests. An individual interest from the lobby side has to be part of the common good to be carried on as the actor’s goals remain the same: The political side represents the public and, therefore, the common good. How transparency is to be understood in this setting will be analysed in Section 4.2.2.5.

Social Media
As mentioned before, digital communication had to be analysed further. Therefore, the researcher subsumed all social networks that interview partners reported using in their work into the sub-code social media channels. The two main codes that arose were Twitter and Facebook, which were discussed by both political and lobbying side. Most participants like Facebook because they can discuss aspects of, and explain their work to, a large peer group of their age. Twitter was also one of the most mentioned social tools for communication with journalists and interest groups, or the so-called “Berlin bubble”. Twitter and Facebook were by far the most frequently mentioned apps on the political side. However, they were not directly connected to digital lobbying during the conversations with politicians. The lobbyists, however, did mention both social media and paid content in their lobbying strategy, as the following quote shows.

…using the digital sector, well, I’ll say everything with a publicity effect on the internet, to spread your political messages to politicians. I could also do that with certain paid content, I can work towards certain target groups, for example politicians at some level, seeing my messages more than any other people or other messages. That would be one possibility. It’s also very much about the public sphere. (Interview 12)
Instagram was described as an even more personal (Interview 6) medium and understood to be a door opener to communicate with the younger generation: If I want to reach young people in my constituency, I would use [...] Instagram. (Interview 1)

LinkedIn was only mentioned as a source for “sporadic” interaction (Interview 15), and there were single mentions of TikTok, Xing, and YouTube. Certain other tools also play a role in the information processes of the participants. Websites and homepages were mentioned as good sources of information on the one hand; on the other hand, some interview partners reported that the internet does not guarantee correct information. However, it does give most participants a platform to inform themselves, prove information, and discuss topics in more detail.

**Politics and political perspective**

*Politics* is a new code that came up in this second phase of open coding, as the researcher realised that it is logical to separate *political aspects* and *political perspectives* from *lobbying* due to the communicative or actor perspective. In the first phase, different political topics were integrated within the codes; now, looking more closely at different opinions and goals helped to separate aspects better. Consequently, the researcher decided in this second phase that it was more convenient to have a standalone code with more detailed sub-codes. Thereby, she was able to express the different elements of political processes described, as well as actors and their perspectives or working habits and, finally, the political target group: the public.

Even though the code *society and public* did not stay within *politics* in the final order, the researcher realised through the process that the public was obviously the main target group for political actors and needed to be an individual code which would later gain even more importance. Looking further into the code made the researcher think of the public as another individual actor. Another reason for the decision to separate the perspectives is that the researcher also realised that the majority of the participants were from the political side. They sometimes talked less about lobbying and more about their general political working situation to justify their lobby contacts or give (positive and negative) lobbying examples in the political context. Thus, the researcher integrated *politics* as a new sub-code in the code *context* to give these thoughts an individual breeding ground.
Within this code she found strategies, internal actors like employees in the role as gatekeepers or individual parties, target groups, input and output of the political side. The setting led to the assumption that, through the use of digital communication and, more specifically, social media, the pre-political field is widening. The political context finds itself in a larger and more complex system that no longer works as it once did. Widening the field also means opening the floor to more actors, as explained in the following section.

4.2.2.3 Creation of a New Contact Field

Participants talked about their work, strategies, and responsibilities and how they see changes before and after digital transformation. Looking at these descriptions revealed points of contact, especially for lobbyists. These points of contact were confirmed by participants on the political side and are summarised in the chart below.

![Diagram of Points of Contact before and after Digital Transformation](image)

**Points of contact before digital transformation:**

Lobbyist → Network → Output

**Points of contact after digital transformation:**

Actor → Public → Output

*Figure 21: Points of Contact before and after Digital Transformation (Source: Author)*

It is clear that digital communication multiplies points of contacts, hence widening the pre-political field and giving more room for more actors. Including the public is an important indicator for a larger pre-political field. Furthermore, such “field” indicates to be more than just a “point of contact”. Hence, a new contact field is emerging.
Through digital communication, the public is brought into closer contact with decision-makers and politics in general. This contact field brings lobby actors, politics, and now the public all together on the same ground. Table 23 below depicts the emerging contact field.

![Diagram showing the contact field with public, politics, lobby, and digital communication]

*Figure 22: Field of Contact (Source: Author)*

It is through this new contact field that the previously explained “circle of communication” debates are given input publicly before the content, which is then the output, reaches the political actor. Thereby, individual interests are contrasted and discussed by public actors who give the common good a deeper meaning through digital means. Through this contact, existing rules change, which affects former patterns of influence. However, the data revealed that the process is not yet completed. Therefore, the schism between old and new is analysed in the following section.

### 4.2.2.4 Schism between “Old” and “New”

Analysing change showed the path from analogue to digital in lobbying and how difficult it was for participants to differentiate between them (as explained in the first coding round). This code is the extension or, rather, result of a deeper analysis: the schism between old and new lobbying worlds. The previously mentioned argument of first indicators of a power shift is strengthened by the observation of the dissolution of boundaries of classic lobbying through the emergence of digital communication in the field, enabling new actors to emerge. A schism is the symbol for these ongoing
developments that are not yet completed. Running different queries through NVivo and looking more deeply into the coded passages again led to this code. Starting to analyse the data led the researcher in one direction, while continuing to look at the interviews again and again revealed more. Although at a certain point the researcher was blocked, she realised through discussions with her supervisors that this so-called “dead end” brought her to a result: both paths were relevant and “real”. Hence, the code *schism* was the solution to describing the findings. To be more precise, the researcher was surprised that the combination of “classic lobbying” and “change” only led to a few matches, suggesting there is no “real change” in lobbying so far:

*The kind of lobbying that I get to know is, well, of course you get invitations by email and one could see that as digital in some way, but as far as possible, lobbying always takes place in a personal conversation or you get things sent to you, talks and so on. So, I would say that lobbying is not and doesn’t work that way in the digital world.*

*(Interview 2)*

And also:

*To be honest, it hasn’t changed that much, so there are a few associations that, I say, are active on Twitter and very rarely on LinkedIn. And otherwise, I say more classic media work. But in my opinion, the majority of the associations still use the classical conversations, events - the classical formats. And a few people are a bit more active digitally, but many don’t even want this large exposure, i.e., public presentation.*

*(Interview 15)*
The following chart summarises the most important aspects mentioned in terms of lobbying.

![Lobbying Aspects Diagram]

*Figure 23: Lobbying Aspects (Source: Author)*

Combining “digital lobbying” and “change” showed similar results, which was initially surprising.

*The addition of “digital” does not change anything for me in terms of lobbying, does not change anything for me in terms of objectives – in my opinion it only changes the channels that can be used. Without influence on the actual content or the own objective. So, it’s a pure change of tools or the toolbox. (Interview 7)*

And also:

*It is similar, but without the personal contact. Can one put it that way? So then without the really big ... dinners and...that doesn’t work, but I’m afraid at some point it will only be like that. Although, real lobbying works better on a personal level, I think. And on a personal level it is not traceable, on a digital level it is still traceable. (Interview 6)*

As well as:
“Digital lobbying” - The word is a bit strange to me. The kind of lobbying that I get to know is, well, of course you get invitations by email and one could see that as digital in some way, but as far as possible lobbying takes always place in a personal conversation or that you get things sent to you, talks and so on. So, I would say that lobbying is not and doesn’t work that way in the digital world. (Interview 2)

When the researcher looked into digital lobbying only, the complete opposite evidence from lobbyists was found.

I thought about digital lobbying, digital public affairs, that we use data analysis and stuff like that. I once read that in the USA one could run the Members of Congress or whatever, yes, via an algorithm to find out and “predict” how they would behave and vote on the next law. [...] I think digital lobbying could or should be much more than just social media. (Interview 13)

The following chart summarises the most important aspects mentioned in terms of digital lobbying:

![Digital Lobbying Aspects](image-url)

*Figure 24: Digital Lobbying Aspects (Source: Author)*
Comparing both charts (figure 24 and 25) of major aspects shows how different the participants’ focuses are and what is gained through digital transformation. The differences regard:

- Actors: small personal network before, and wide public range afterwards;
- Communication basis: trust before, and effectiveness through paid content afterwards;
- Strategies: more variety through social media when moving an individual interest (input) towards the common good (output).

One goal on both communicating sides – seeking information – continues to be important. Hence, this part of the basic structure regarding information and positions through communication tools and channels remains. However, how to get there changes, as explained above.

4.2.2.5 Transparency in Times of Transformation

The previous sections describe the schism between old and new processes as well as challenges and opportunities for communication and the parties involved which arise from digital transformation. These developments can be viewed with different analytic categories in mind, transparency being an important one. Opening the discussion of transparency in the political field and lobbying is part of the analysis in times of transformation (Harris & Fleisher, 2005; Oswald & Johann, 2018, p. 7).

One question that remained from the first analysis round was whether transparency was seen as a tool, in terms of positive commercialization, or really “lived” as an attitude, in terms of a political standard. The researcher started to look into the quotes under the transparency code and combined them with other codes to see if there was an overlap. While running the two codes transparency and positive sentiment together in NVivo, a lobbying example from an opposition member occurred to the researcher. The politician had described a concrete case of positive transparent lobbying simply because he attended a meeting and saw who participated and was introduced to everyone.

The [bank XY] likes to invite people, maybe others do that as well, but I know it from the bank XY. The representatives were present, they were introduced, and then they
invited others from the farmers’ association and so on and other associations, the bank’s employees in Berlin, and that’s it. (Interview 5)

Here, the responsibility for transparent communication, or, literally, the introduction and clear statement of who attended an event held to discuss an issue, was seen purely from the non-political side. The politician externalised the responsibility for transparency to the inviting non-political side. However, another political interviewee from a governing party described almost the opposite – within the code transparency register – and demanded it for the German political system. The passage demonstrates transparency understood as a standard for the field.

For me, the term “transparency register” is almost too vague for that, because it does not tell us how strong the influence is, how it really has an effect in terms of a legislative footprint. That is why I am proposing a lobby register for the time being of what we are talking about and planning in the German Bundestag. Even more precisely, one would have to say a “lobbyist register”. That would be a very precise term. Because for the time being it is only fixed by the person who is lobbying: What subject? For which client? The second step would then be to consider: Can I at some point derive a legislative footprint from this? But then I have to take an overall view: with a view to the government, because the draft bill comes from a ministry. Especially in the early phase, when lobbying is basically beginning, even with a draft law which is then submitted to the cabinet, which is only introduced into the Bundestag by the cabinet... So, if I want to depict the legislative footprint, then I have to start almost in the phase before the draft bill when a topic comes up...if necessary fixed in the coalition agreement...then I basically have to depict the whole genesis. (Interview 1)

Here, the participant describes a normative standard or condition for transparency which should start even before the official definition. This second example thus shows the principle of “attitude”, whereby both communicating sides are obliged to present their contacts. In contrast, the earlier example shows that transparency is also seen as an instrument to externalise responsibility. Transparency is then also used in case of an advantage for the political side and this specific use is to be understood as a tool.
Using NVivo helped the researcher to separate and combine quotes on transparency and identify communication channels as vehicles for the participants to use or live transparency. In order to understand “how transparency is used as a tool or attitude” by different participants, table 24 below summarises the different communication channels and shows what they stand for, according to the interviews.

Figure 25: Basis of Connections (Source: Author)

The political interviewees see communication channels and the relation between them within a communication mix whose parts are based on transparency. Surprisingly, own communication channels are used to attain “first-hand information” while classic media are used to be more transparent and independent of intermediators, as demonstrated in the following quote.

So, in the context of social media, there has been an extreme amount of change. I also believe that as far as the independence of individual politicians from parties is
concerned, one can position oneself much better as an individual by using one’s own channels and not being dependent on the organizational structure that is behind press work. (Interview 10)

The problematic aspect is that each politician decides individually what to publish; hence, independence does not mean transparency. This becomes especially clear when looking at the other side, as lobbyists talked about communication channels in terms of a strategy mix. Strategy, too, is not based on transparency but on the effectiveness and success of using social media as a tool. However, the output can lead to transparency, as shown in Table 25 below.

![Diagram of Social Media as Tool: Monitoring]

**Figure 26: Connections between Codes (Source: Author)**
One lobbyist clearly explained transparency through the use of digital communication via Twitter.

*I tweet as a private person, by my name. But everyone can see that I work at XY. And of course, it says “Head of Public Affairs”. It’s also obvious that I have politically something to do with the issues. Anyone can see that. [...] That means it is okay for me to appear with it in public. The general public can see whose interests I stand for, because I have a good reason to do so.* (Interview 12)

This position regarding Twitter is, however, understood as an exception and is not followed by the whole industry, as demonstrated by the following quote from an employee on transparency which indicates the nonpolitical side.

*After all, the lobby register is still only a voluntary idea. [...] I believe [industries] accept it very benevolent.* (Interview 10)

To summarise, the researcher argues that transparency is a side effect of digital lobbying due to its greater effectiveness. The overall goal for lobbyists remains to convince policymakers and for politicians to reach their electorates. Neither party naturally aims to achieve full transparency. This is the reason transparency is indeed based on both the attitude and the tool to show the public what is going on behind the scenes. The dominant reason for this externalization of responsibility in terms of transparency to the other communicating side is to radiate a positive image. Transparency is therefore understood as an analytic category.

### 4.2.3 Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Model

The analysis of the interviews – with the aim of a pre-model – generated a very normative-driven discussion, even though the goal was, and continues to be, a neutral, descriptive model. Normativity indicates how something should be, whereas an empirically-minded thesis focuses on connections, as reflected in the quote below (Simmel, 2012, p. 321):
“What is called normative science is in fact only the science of the normative. It itself does not standarise anything, but only explains norms and their contexts, because science always asks questions causally, not teleologically, and norms and purposes can as well as everything else, be the object of their investigation, but not their own essence.”

The topics of participation and transparency in (digital) lobbying are dominant aspects through their ideological potential and require special attention in order to be categorised appropriately. The ideologically driven perspectives that came out of the interviews were discussed in terms of outcomes of the first data round, before an ideologically neutral interpretation was ultimately drawn.

One ideologically driven perspective resulted from the combination of two concepts that arose in the second coding round: the circle of communication and the new contact field. These thoughts are bound up with how individual interest and common good interests are debated publicly. The assumption that these are discussed before reaching a political actor, lead – in a normative perspective – to the question of whether such systematic change in the overall communication system touches upon given principles. In this view, these developments lead to questions such as:

- Do these collective developments, that cause a dominant public participation, touch the culture of a representative democracy?
- Does a representative democracy, now, actually have the chance to fully function through public agenda setting?

It is important to recognise such normative-driven ideas, even though the goal of this thesis is to create a theoretical model or a descriptive statement about reality, especially since purely factual reasons do not always establish the truth of reality or probable truth of a conclusion (Foster, 1971, p. 36). At this point, a certain prescriptive and evaluative normative potential in constructivism might have been found in terms of transparency and participation in digital lobbying. Such potential would aim to question the relationship between normative theories and constructivism and to propose some starting points for an exchange between these two schools. Nevertheless, this thesis is not seeking to supplement constructivist thoughts with normative theory.
The previous questions on how participation in times of digital communication should work in order to protect the given setting would lead to a prescriptive model. Coming back to a neutral description of the analysis the question is: Does the public access into the digital contact field result in changes to existing lobbying rules? Thereby, the contact field addresses more ideologically neutral questions, such as:

- What changes occur?
- Who are the new public actors?

Another ideologically driven perspective is whether more transparency is needed in (digital) lobbying and whether actors need guidelines. These thoughts are bound up with how the process of lobbying should occur. Coming back to a neutral perspective with the research gap in mind, the analysis resulted in transparency, understood as an analytic category to question digital lobbying. Thereby, transparency addresses more ideologically neutral questions, such as:

- Who are the actors?
- What actions are taken?

It is important to reflect on these developments and thoughts at this point of the thesis, as deciding whether to adopt a descriptive or prescriptive model affects all subsequent steps. The normative parts of the analysis are thus recognised as such, but are not given such a strong emphasis in the next data round.

### 4.2.4 Theoretical Sampling and Analytical Induction of Interviews

Throughout the analysis, the researcher continued to expand her reading of the relevant literature so that she could form thoughts into ideas and work with them. This was especially important since, at the beginning of the research process, investigation is difficult without certainty about the exact and final research direction. Thus, the adequate sampling is done during the research process. It is the constant investigation through theoretical sampling that helps to deepen the focus on the emerging categories or codes with the goal of reaching saturation (A. Strauss & Corbin, 2010, p. 150). This
key element of GTM is demonstrated in this section, which connects the interviews with the overall context of the thesis. The most important findings are described in the following sections.

Deepening the focus on the codes *individual interest* and *common good interest* led the researcher to a series of publications by a German practitioner. Joos (1998) presents a practical basis for the importance of transforming “individual interest towards common interests.” The practitioner speaks of “cases that allow for a change in perspective – from the client’s interest to the common interest” (Joos, 2015, p. 4). Changing the perspective from one individual interest as the success formula in lobbying is explained in the following steps: identifying the complex situation, dissecting content and process, finding a perspective change on the content level, analysing the process through which the changed perspective argument is to be carried, and realising the solution through the found content logic attached to the process (Joos, 2015). What is missing from this process is how digital transformation and digital communication affect this strategy, including in terms of processes, which is the core of the findings so far. Furthermore, the overall lobbying success is also affected when new terms are included in political processes (i.e., digital public actors) as well as their respective perspectives, from the beginning. Still, the essential point is that the idea of a “perspective change” for classic lobbying (Joos, 1998) supports the findings in terms of the identified “circle of communication” that debates input publicly before the content reaches the political actor. Now, individual interest vs. common good requires further analysis in a digital context.

Recent European papers advance this understanding: Through a communicative role, public interest is reanalysed in terms of lobbying goals. Scholars say that “the public interest can be communicatively constructed both explicitly and implicitly and [outline] how it can be used as a mechanism for advocating organizational interests in democratic societies” (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 10). The researcher’s findings link to these thoughts in terms of public interest as well as lobbying in a communicative perspective. It is, however, important to differentiate democratic assumptions in the wider context (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 10), as this thesis does not follow a normative position.

Another aspect that emerged from the public interest findings concerns how lobbyists communicate. The code *common good interest* reflects this thought in a recently-
discussed European publication. Raknes and Ihlen (2018) found that (as explained on page 159) “lobbyists often argue that their proposal will benefit the whole of society. These arguments build on appeals to shared social goals, collective goods, community, or appeals to the public interest” (Raknes & Ihlen, 2018, p. 1). Apparently, interest groups use public interest even when pursuing individual interests, which leads scholars to pose questions regarding lobbying impacts, especially on the democratic process: “In a world where all interest groups claim to work for the public interest, how should decision makers and voters evaluate these claims?” (Raknes & Ihlen, 2018, p. 7). The criticism has been raised that not enough knowledge has been identified in terms of rhetorical operation and linguistic arguments (and now even touching democratic processes). The communicative results at this point of the thesis, in terms of private and public interests, are therefore supported by these recent publications.

One aspect that is represented in interviews as well as the literature is ontological and educative authenticity, described by Guba and Lincoln (2005) as “paradigmatic controversies, contradictions and emerging confluences.” Participants in this study said in the interviews that they expected transparent lobbyism to be exactly that: educative and authentic. It is remarkable that their ideas, coded as educational, match the “criteria for determining a raised level of awareness in the first instance, by individual research participants and, in the second, by individuals about those who surround them or with whom they come into contact for some social or organizational purpose” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 207). One employee, for example, said:

_The political presentation is more important than the actual implementation. I think we really need a higher culture of political co-determination here, that is to be established in schools from the very beginning so that one feels like a political co-determiner all the time. And that we understand that every decision we make in life is like politics._

_(Interview 10)_

Another aspect that the researcher would like to address was enriched by a German scholar who suggested “disruptive affairs” as a new term to describe internal and external communication work. This combination of manual tools and the necessary mindset to meet the digital-disruptive world guided the creation of the code disruptive (Bender, 2010; Bender et al., 2016, p. 136). Other scholars agree that the aim of
building acceptance and trust is not only necessary in the age of digital transformation but also demands disruptive thoughts (Köppl, 2017, p. 146). The understanding that lobbying is a two-way communication (Milbrath, 1960) that is especially affected in structural ways because digital transformation touches tools, strategies, and communication channels (Bengler & Schmauder, 2016, p. 75) brought the researcher, especially after the interviews, to the consideration that the mindset is crucial. Disruptive outside happenings are given, but disruptive inside attitude or thoughts are starting to grow – on the lobbying side. Examples within the code future possibilities of digital lobbying demonstrate some aspects that are purely based on a personal mindset.

Today is more like the future, what the [institution] is doing, for example. At least I think it’s them…somebody does transparent lobbying that is understandable. [...] I think that belongs to the future. It is simply demanded. [...] In any case, I think it’s a role model. The whole thing also runs digitally. Everything is posted, readable on the homepage, readable in social media. Therefore, certainly a model for the question of transparency and the use of the digital, the digital possibilities for lobbying. (Interview 12)

A role model defines a desire or goal and also states that the majority of mindsets has not yet reached it. Having all these tools but not using them leaves out a major element of disruptiveness. The resulting question is what mindset is necessary for digital lobbying or even “disruptive (digital) lobbying”.

These ideas, which emerged throughout the analysis process, are important for the next steps and are therefore addressed in the next section.

4.2.5 First Data Conclusion and Pre-Model

This first data round set out to explain the role of sentiments in terms of changes in lobbying through digital transformation. The main issues to emerge were the high level of bewilderment in the core understanding of digital lobbying and how the statements of interviewees in this first data-gathering round changed during the interviews. The following table summarises sentiments towards lobbying and digital lobbying, as well as the influence of each. By comparing the first positive statements – on the surface –
and later rather negative comments – underlying/core – on the political side, an enormous change was identified, as summarised in Table 20.

Table 20: Surface and Underlying Sentiments of Interviewees on Interview Aspects (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentiments</th>
<th>Lobbying</th>
<th>Digital lobbying</th>
<th>Influence of lobbying</th>
<th>Influence of digital lobbying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying/Core</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, the practice of lobbying, digital lobbying, and the influence of lobbying are confirmed and mostly seen as positive. When the interviews progressed, however, the participants either neglected the practical realization of lobbying or when confirming it, it was through negative comments. However, the influence of digital lobbying was not confirmed in the beginning but described later on. These enormous differences already demonstrated that digital transformation has started to shift how lobbying and its influence was perceived (before Covid-19).

Participants reported the growing number of new actors, changing communication, and different ratings for channels of communicating. Therefore, the final code for this first data round is strategy. Digital communication changes lobbying strategies in terms of their input and output perspectives regarding individual interests and common good interests. The researcher argues that lobbying in the digital age is a process undergoing transformation. Hence, the first indication of a power shift is to be carried over into further analysis in the second data round. A shift is explained as causing something or someone to “move or change from one position or direction to another” (CambridgeUniversityPress, 2020) which is the case here.

The researcher concluded the final codes to create the pre-model from this first data round, as demonstrated in the chart below, followed by a second, more detailed circle.
Figure 27: Pre-Model (Source: Author)

Figure 28: Pre-Model Addition (Source: Author)
The development of a power shift is the overall analysis of this first data round. This analysis addresses the context in terms of external happenings and the process itself in terms of internal happenings. “External” stands for an increase in the importance of digital communication as more people use social media and discuss positions and interests digitally. Increasing public participation and more actors affect lobbying strategies that, in turn, indicate more digital possibilities. “Internal” stands for the internal process that follows digital discussions and affects the relationship between input and output. Individual interests are affected by public participation and stand in direct relation to common good interests. Both internal and external happenings affect the influence of lobbying.

The following components are part of the process and lead to a new overall agenda in digital lobbying:

- The inclusion of society and emergence of new digital actors → leading to a new contact field for politics, lobbyists, and the public;
- Digital channels and tools to form new strategies → leading to a digital discussion (input and output) of common good interests through public participation before a topic reaches politics;
- Internal and external happenings affecting the overall influence.

Thus, an emerging final model needs to include the sum of these elements and requires further validation through a second data round in order to better understand the inner relationship and explain the power shift. The proposed features lead towards conceptual theoretical aspects grounded in this particular overall agenda that is a substantive area of lobbying at German federal level.

4.2.6 Open Aspects of the First Data Round and Indicators for the Next Data Round

By interviewing different actors, it was possible to compare the working processes and positions of the opposing participants. Even though different perspectives illuminate the process, some points remained unclear after this first data round. These aspects had to be evaluated and discussed in the FGs and were as follows:
How time, common good interest, and individual interest determine the model;
How exactly the exact relationship between input and output – individual interest vs common good interest – is to be understood in the digital circle of communication;
How exactly social media channels relate to lobbying actors, and how actors use social media to contact politicians;
Whether personal preferences or age (“young people” / “youth”) are a factor determining the used strategy or medium;
The connection between personal contacts and digital range, and how exactly they affect the overall lobbying process;
The role played by transparency in digital lobbying.

These first findings and thoughts were used to prepare the FGs in order to identify first digital lobbying aspects further.

4.3 Second Data-Gathering Round

The second data-gathering round encompassed the following steps:
Data from FGs has different layers, as explained earlier. Thus, the first sections offer information about the findings of the group (interaction) layer (5.1) and the individual layer within the coding cycles. To demonstrate the findings from this data round as a whole and still ensure transparency in regard to how codes and categories evolved during the analysis, different codes and coding steps are presented for each methodological phase. The first is open coding, which reveals the overall coding structure (Section 5.2), followed by the axial coding phase (Section 5.3), its dimensions (Section 5.4), and selective coding (5.5).
As the researcher is a visual learner, drawing and working with codes on stick-on posts was extremely helpful in finding explanations to the RQs. In the axial coding phase, in particular, working with manual charts was very important regarding the different perspectives. Several analytic drawings are therefore included in this chapter (Sections 5.3 A, B, C). In the selective coding phase, it was important to combine the sources into a single analysis. Therefore, layers were combined to find the core discussion and help reveal more insights for the overall evaluation and results.

4.3.1 Results of the Group Layer Analysis

A deep analysis revealed that the discussed topics and opinions shared by the groups varied according to participants’

- Perspectives (political or lobby);
- Institutional roles;
- Political positions;
- Years of experience inside the business/institution;
- Mindset and personal attitude towards digital communication and change.

Nevertheless, participants established common ground within the discussions. Even when some individuals could not position themselves actively in terms of their own experience or perspective, they tried to understand each other and built upon their individual perspectives at some point. For example, the first employee FG revealed the codes first contact and continuation or keeping contact as sub-codes of social media meeting room (which will be introduced in Section 4.3.3.2, “Axial Coding Political Perspective”).

[…] I understand that as the first contact with the MP, I would definitely say that it has become easier. Quite apart from Covid-19, you used to have to sit down and open the phone book to call. Even if you wanted to join a political party. Today, all things are available digitally, all contact data, you can simply write an email, and the question is, of course – as has already been mentioned – today, access to MPs is easier than ever before thanks to digital transformation. (T12)

...
I actually think that it doesn’t necessarily gets easier. Because becoming easier also
means that much more people perceive things and thereby an incredible “noise” arises.
And to get through the “pre-filter” that filters people in this noise out... matches from
“contacting” to “successful contacting” [...] (T10)

I would agree 100% with that. That was exactly...so, to say first contact stands for “I
reach them somehow via post, email, telephone...” then it certainly became simpler to
find contacts in politics. But when it comes to getting feedback or that there really is an
acceptance in a real sense, I really believe that it has not become better because simply
so much “pours in” so to say through all channels that it is much more difficult to get
through. [...] (T8)

Yes, I would say that as well. So, the access barrier is perhaps easier to open through
digital transformation. I would say that this has increased again in recent years. But the
fact that lobbying is really successful or that the message behind it really has a greater
likelihood of being perceived and taken on board, this is still due to personal contacts,
relationships and how one presents oneself, of course. [...] (T11)

Another example, from the lobbying company FG, was the personal “shitstorm”
experience of one participant, which was used as common ground to explain the risks
and advantages of digital communication. The story came up after one participant
whose company lobbied digitally explained that shitstorms are a risk that can happen in
the online business. The other participants knew the story from the outside and
established a collective understanding of the scene through the enriching insider
perspective. Hence, a common understanding of digital lobbying potential in terms of a
“door opener” into politics was achieved, but at the same time a sense of the underlying
personal risk which accompanies it was developed. The following quotes demonstrate
the learning.

...But on the other hand, it’s clear that one can also bring extreme risks along. I’m
talking about shitstoms or extreme right-wing comments, which are of course
awakened with it. So, one has to reckon with that. (T17)

...
And uh, I’ve already had the experience of a shitstorm. I don’t know if any of you have experienced that? With friends from a movement (name excluded) in Berlin, who were mentioned earlier. (Whispering through participants). And funny enough, that had a completely different effect than I feared, I was not kicked out, although many attacked me in that shitstorm and demanded it. [...] That should A) not happen to one of course, but B) the effect was interesting. The effect was that since then, it has been much easier for me to get appointments in political Berlin that I didn’t get before, because everyone wanted to meet the person behind this shitstorm, yes. So, it was this experience “It doesn’t matter what the news is, yes, the main thing is that you got some.” I can’t recommend that for imitation, and I certainly won’t repeat it myself. But it can have completely different effects than, yes, one might fear at first. (T20)

On the political side, examples with negative connotations were shared as well, here related to “pressure” and the need for “resilience” in times of digital communication.

And for us, that also means that politicians need greater resilience, because communication in social media has a completely different style, and one is no longer automatically – and I’ll try to put this in a value-neutral way – one is no longer automatically a person of respect. But that also means that one also offers a surface for attack, which makes this type of exchange difficult in a certain way, and secondly, and that is what I mean to say with it, one also has to acquire a great deal of resilience, if one doesn’t already have it. (T4)

And

The difficulty or the challenge, um, when I feel like I’m being pushed to do something, not through insights and through a debate and arguments, but through pressure. Yes? Or through subtle things, yes. And that increases now, of course, with all the new things, all the new technical possibilities that are out there. That triggers in me personally – and I can only speak for myself – a greater content, content drive to build in appropriate resilience levels and I know that I also need them, because it goes against my own – if I may say it pathetically – I call it now my professional honour, ethos whatever...not convinced or rather convinced that it is the wrong thing to do but shall be convinced, however, through pressure that I indulge people. (T6)
Only in the association lobbying FG did participants start with a very strong and common position in the introduction game but then appear not to establish a real shared identity or status from which they could collectively agree later on. They were not able to speak with one voice during the discussion; in fact, the researcher-moderator sensed that two participants were starting to duel each other’s opinion. This had to do with the fact that one participant had to leave a little early, which created a light competition for the last word between the two remaining interviewees. The fact that the FG had the smallest number of participants – three – was challenging. Additionally, the group included mixed association roles that turned out to be relevant to the individuals. One interviewee positioned himself as an expert from both perspectives through his additional voluntary political role at municipal level and triggered the competition which led the other participant to contradict his comments.

The MPs constructed their narratives as a group of leaders in their field when speaking of the “other side” (lobbyists) and how “they try” to reach them. All political FGs also commented on “their strategies” and how “these strategies were well known.” Employees identified themselves as “gatekeepers” in the groups and also as the social media managers or advisors to their bosses in order to present them in the most authentic way possible. Their open mindset towards digital communication is an advantage in most constellations, mostly because of “digital native knowledge.” A positive finding is that the voice of group members that did not fit this shared status was not silenced; on the contrary, the two more experienced participants chose to learn from the digital native perspectives. In addition, in both FGs the person with the most experienced background balanced the opinions out and was able to lead the ideas toward common and realistic conclusions.

All in all, a shared status of “officially registered and professional lobbyists” or “official members and employees of the German Bundestag” enabled participants to talk safely and confidentially on this subject, as they could refer to “those who do not work professionally” or “those without a structure” when discussing it. The example of shared personal stories, even if some were negative – the “shitstorm” – was, arguably, the result of the safe environment the group established.
In the following sections, concrete examples will be given alongside a description of the coding rounds.

4.3.2 FG Open Coding

Throughout an iterative process, the large number of open codes (about 140) led to the final coding order shown in Figure 22.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Main Codes</th>
<th>Theoretical Dimensions</th>
<th>Main Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicity</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analogue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Lobbying</td>
<td>Lobbyists</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic Lobbying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Mindset</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Long-term changes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-digital Mindset</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda Setter</td>
<td>Social Media as</td>
<td>Short-term changes</td>
<td>Power Shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback Tool</td>
<td>Digital Gatekeeper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press Release</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Room</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interest</td>
<td>The Public</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Good Interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of group and individual levels revealed how to organise the open codes and led to the final structure. These final codes and categories were introduced into the axial coding section with more detail to explain their relationships.

The results from open coding were challenging, which is why the researcher went back to the data to confirm the structure several times. Thus, categories and main codes changed throughout the different coding phases. The researcher was only able to finalise the overall category and main code structure after the identification of the theoretical dimensions (see the “Dimensions” section for more detail). In another step, the dimensions were sorted out from the third layer code structure and helped to identify the final coding tree.
In order to present the coding development from the first codes and how they were restructured, two examples are given: communication and influence on lobbying strategy.

The code *communication* was found early on. The following chart includes all sub-codes from the perspectives of both lobbyists and politicians.

![Communication Chart](image)

*Figure 29: Early Code Communication (Source: Author)*

A closer look at the individual sub-codes revealed more sub-codes. For example, *communication strategies* revealed another coding tree with three orders of codes. The researcher realised that the first-order code *communication* actually included different aspects of communication found in the data. Recognising the universality of lobbying communication and its different elements in an analogue and digital setting was a crucial finding in that status. The dimensions of the sub-codes were sorted after the open coding (for more detail, see the Section 4.3.3 on “Axial Coding”).
Exhausting strategy through the given literature helped the researcher in the second order of codes. Putting all the codes together and thereby mixing the perspectives in the open coding helped to substantiate the general third-order code *influence on lobbying strategy*.

*Table 23: Three-order code Influence on Lobbying Strategy (Source: Author)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-order codes</th>
<th>Second-order codes</th>
<th>Third-order codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobilising character</td>
<td>Grassroots lobbying</td>
<td>Influence on lobbying strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilising through identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of the mass</td>
<td>Hybrid lobbying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mix of lobbying and activism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New way to lobby</td>
<td>Inside lobbying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New lobby strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel use of analogue and digital lobbying methods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in method</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity of the individual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key business is the old lobbying toolbox</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic lobbying focuses on interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic lobbying is personal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantage of personal conversations is sharpness on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Outside lobbying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying gains a sentiment through social media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying gives information through social media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online dynamic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantage to create more pressure digitally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following sections give further detail about the final coding order as well as the different perspectives of axial coding.
4.3.3 FG Axial Coding

After going through the open codes several times, the researcher was able to identify categories and sub-categories. Through the axial coding, these were put in relation to each other. The following charts demonstrate the relationships found between the codes (dark blue stands for known aspects (classic lobbying) and red for the new or added (mostly digital) developments). The researcher used the paradigmatic model to find relationships between the most important codes. Several different scenarios and perspectives were found. Only those crucial to the overall research aim are included:

A) The lobby perspective;
B) The political perspective, including the employee angle;
C) The overall perspective that includes both sides bringing the process analysis forward.

4.3.3.1 Axial Coding Lobbying Perspective

In discussions with lobbyists, the change brought by digital transformation was discussed in terms of social-media-situated communication.

![Paradigmatic Model One](Source: Author)
Social Media as Causal Condition and Phenomenon

Social media are used to establish new and maintaining existing contacts, but, more importantly, lobbyists use social media for information gathering. They inform themselves about published political actions and positions but also obtain feedback on public interests; hence, they use the public as backup to measure how certain topics are perceived. The analysis of how certain arguments perform online produces more in-depth information for lobbyists, who then prepare meetings and arguments through the social media evaluation of comments and likes from the public (feedback information).

Furthermore, lobbyists use social media to connect with more representatives of the political sphere. Lobbyists who communicate on social media use them to connect or gain attention in order to be known when it comes to arranging later personal meetings. It is also important to them to maintain their relationships with existing personal contacts in the digital space. Either way, the goal is to schedule personal meetings since, as one of the company lobbyists said, “Nothing beats personal contact” (T20).

Clearly, then, lobbyists continue to prefer talking in person as a strategy for interacting with their target group. They use social media as they give an entry opportunity to prepare a conversation, impress by a certain range, and counteract the biggest prejudice against them: lack of transparency. Thus, using transparency as a strategy in terms of a positive image is an important way to reach their target group. However, using transparency in this way means taking a small detour via the public to reach their actual target group. This perspective is novel to the classic nonpublic lobbying tradition. Even though the goal of talking privately does not change, the way to reach this type of personal conversation does. Hence, the direction of lobbying from the lobbyists’ perspective changes by including the public via digital communication.

![Figure 31: New Digital Lobbying Communication Direction (Source: Author)](image-url)

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The use of Transparency as Strategy

Looking more closely at the strategy of transparency reveals more details on how to achieve this goal. Another participant in the company lobbyist FG gave further details on the possible consequences of transparency.

*I would open up a counter-thesis [...] that by setting up a website and precisely tracking where lobby meetings are held, what is spent on them, which meetings take place... one can turn it from an anonymous lobbying activity into a very, very transparent action that is also “identitary” for the company. I think it depends very much on whether you do it, but in this case, I think it’s quite massive, so that you say this anonymity is completely taken away, and you simply say you go out transparently and thereby create an identity. (T21)*

The quote reveals the awareness that transparency can bring identity to lobbying actors and thus, again, demonstrates the strategic background of transparent communication. At this point, it is also important to comment on the use of monologue platforms like websites. Whether a communication platform is monologue or dialogue also determines the amount of transparency given. Websites automatically only include the information the publisher wants to share. However, even with dialogical communication tools such as social media, the commentary functions are often deactivated due to the risk of “shitstorms” and thus limit transparency in terms of dialogue.

New Lobbying Direction as a Consequence

Thus, digital lobbying works differently in terms of direction: The public is included in order to achieve personal, one-on-one conversations, just like in classic lobbying. However, the steps between setting a goal such as a conversation (step one) and actually having the conversation (step three) are published and include the public (step two). Hence, step two is added to classic lobbying. Participants named digital communication and social media as a “new dimension” (T27, T29, T30) or “filter” (T10, T12, T23) in terms of an additional obstacle to actually reaching decision-makers.
Shitstorms as an Intervening Condition

Digital communication can be an obstacle to reaching the political sphere but, at the same time, be very useful. One example was given by a lobbyist who published a comment on Twitter that resulted in a huge shitstorm. Even though he first thought the negative public attention might even cost him his job, it actually opened many doors in the political sphere through the attention he gained, so in fact he managed to arrange more personal meetings than ever before. It is important to say that this strategy of gaining attention, including letting one’s identity be known publicly, comes at a cost, as he explains.

Yes, if one is willing to pay a high price for it, then yes. So, I got a lot of encouragement in political Berlin for my statements, even for the brutality of my statements against this organization. I had not expected that, especially not from the Greens. (T20)

Digital Lobbying as Context

It is important to state that neither reaching someone digitally, nor actually scheduling a meeting with the target group, is yet defined as a lobbying success. In several FGs, participants were clear about the differentiation between a first contact and further continuation or keeping contact (see group analysis of employees (FG1) in Section 4.3.1 for examples). Not even continuing contact guarantees overall success and, accordingly, a definition was developed that divided communication into “quality” and “quantity”:

Having the first statement of T26 in mind again, when we talked about the “more” [≠ than just a first contact] so to speak. Yes, an important point was that we were talking about a quantitative addition [≠ through the many digital communication channels]
here. But this is the question of the quality of the things that are brought to the decision-maker [...] (T27)

The lobbyist who developed the idea throughout the discussion changed her opinion about the different goals that lobbyists can set in a digital setting. The following chart demonstrates these complementary lobbying goals of digital communication and how they depend on each other:

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 33: Complementary Lobbying Aspects (Source: Author)*

The differentiation between a first contact and further continuing contacts was explained in regard to success and how successful contacts really were. Thereby, a discussion came up of whether the creation of more identity was necessary for successful lobbying. Especially through the general idea that the internet can be very anonymous, participants intensively discussed identity as a result of transparency. Throughout this vibrant interaction, participants actually developed an explanation as a group: Identity simply continues to be important digitally in the same way as it does in personal conversations. The same lobbyist acted as a “spokesperson” after discussing the matter with her colleagues and concluded the following:

*If I now assume that this is based on the quality at the end, then this is of course a strengthening and thus actually a shift to identity, because only the one who is identified, only the one who has the personal access, in the end also penetrates to the decision-maker with his or her lobbying approach, with his or her message. (T27)*
In the meantime, another participant pointed out that they were known for their quality by using analogue techniques to successfully lobby and thus also had a strong analogue identity. That participant then developed an idea introduced earlier:

... and becomes identity in the mass! Of course. So yes, as I said, assuming that this is based on quality, then quite clearly. (T27)

Thus, successful contacts depend on how much transparency is offered by both communicating parts. Now, an employee on the political side called the huge amount of anonymous digital communication “noise” (T3), explaining that his impression was that lobbyists had increasing difficulty passing through this “noise” to reach the politicians’ side (see the respective quote in the group analysis Section 4.3.1). Another agency lobbyist also commented on digital communication from her perspective and underpinned the success of non-anonymous in contrast to anonymous communication:

Lobbying etc. requires a certain ability to engage in dialogue, otherwise it makes no sense. And that’s why you somehow also need accessibility and anonymity. So, I would say that there is a lot that happens anonymously, but I think its impact is limited. (T25)

Political Confirmation
The following quote from an MP demonstrates that the political side is generally aware that lobbyists use transparency as a tool. Regarding lobbying arguments, the participant stated very quickly that lobbyists try to “mask” their position to increase one’s impact:

[...] and that one at least tries to clothe one’s interests in a cloak of general common good. Yes...and here the more left-oriented associations are also quite a bit ahead of us, who have always been able to excellently pretend that what they demand is the common good. And I believe that this is simply becoming more widespread [...] (T1)

Another MP also used the image of a “cloak” to refer to changing lobbying methods through digital communication:
I share the view of my colleagues that lobbyists are not focusing on the common good, but that the methodology has changed. Because lobbying is about attracting the attention of the decision-maker, the political decision-maker. And in order to get this attention, I may well choose a different form, addressing someone in digital communication, so that I can get the politician’s attention. Perhaps discuss arguments about the common good, and then perhaps assert my individual interests under the cloak of the common good. And I do experience that, especially in digital communication, when my attention is to be attracted or actually won. As a politician, I’m naturally more inclined to devote myself to the argument if I believe that it’s about the common good and only later realise in a second step that it’s not about the common good at all, but rather about individual interests. This already happens in digital communication, where arguments are made much more indirectly, so that people try to foist digital interests on me under the cloak of the general good. That’s why I can confirm this, at least for the methodology of communication. (T7)

So, looking at all of these comments together, the outcome is that there still exists an important and key feature for communication between lobbyists and politicians, even digitally. For personal communication the key was trust, and now, digitally, it is transparency that ideally leads to identity.

The following section looks more deeply at the political perspective and demonstrates how transparency is connected to the public.
4.3.3.2 Axial Coding Political Perspective

![Paradigmatic Model Two](image)

**Transparency as a Phenomenon**

The main code that is to be understood as a phenomenon from the political perspective is *transparency*. Of course, *transparency* is, again, connected to *digital communication* and, in particular, *social media*, as the code *strategy* shows. However, the understanding of transparency differs under the lobbying perspective. An MP communicates digitally as part of their duty to show parliamentarian actions and positions and, thus, sees transparency as a “by-product”.

*I just think that in this process of digital communication, more transparency goes hand in hand. In other words, it’s actually a by-product, in quotation marks, through which you may have to justify yourself more [...] because pressure is generated through the transparency of others. Now, one may have to justify as member of parliament via these much larger communication channels, via social media, in a different way than perhaps only to journalists in the past. Yes, well ... that’s how I would...yes. (T1)*

The quote and formulation of the term “by-product” reveals that in the political logic of digital communication, transparency is a standard or, rather, a requirement that already existed. The difference is that today, political actors primarily produce their information
themselves (adding to journalistic information). One employee’s explanation of authenticity led in the same direction: It is a political duty to work for the people and therefore transparency is a standard condition.

*So, my MP (= my boss) does everything that is social media independently. Simply because we have had the experience that the more authentic it is, the better it works. It certainly doesn’t work with every MP, but if it works, I don’t think it’s bad at all if the MPs do it themselves so far as time permits. (T1)*

Hence, the politicians’ inside system works according to a different logic to the lobbyists’. Politicians are, to a certain extent, obliged to be transparent, while lobbyists use transparency as a tool. However, not only because political information is more transparent, receivers automatically receive all messages. Digital information can be pushed or pulled. Some MPs, for example, send out newsletters via email, which means that the people in their email list receive the information they share automatically and do not need to actively search for it. It is the same principle as receiving a newspaper (back in the day). Now, simply publishing information on social media or a website is less automatic inasmuch as the public has to actively look for the person and follow them to receive their information. With 709 MPs sitting, this “search” becomes more difficult. However, the algorithms are strong enough to select content, unless other information is rated higher. Even though political actors are more transparent than ever, the public has to be more active and thus does have a certain personal obligation to inform themselves even when using social media.

**Comparison with the Lobbying Side**

The political side is more transparent than the lobbying side when communicating on social media. Thereby, politicians stand in direct connection with the public, who set the agenda. The explanation for this connection is the political actors’ attitude to transparency and their expanded contact field with the public. This closer connection is a crucial aspect of the analysis, and one which determines the overall communication direction. Through the stronger use of digital communication, social media, and spillover effects (to classic media), the public gives policymakers the topics that are then used by politicians to set the framework for lobbying.
The use of Social Media as a Causal Condition and Strategy

Certain aspects of social media were not actively recognised by all participants but, rather, mentioned passively or as side comments in several FGs. Drawing from the relationships that emerged in the axial coding phase, the following sub-codes were derived from the phenomenon social media:

- *Agenda Setter* = stressing topics and prioritising certain interests;
- *Feedback Tool* = analysing how people respond to certain topics; testing public interest;
- *Press Release* = publishing information for more transparency;
- *Meeting Room* = communicating directly in a closer contact field.

These sub-codes were revealed by quotes such as:
Table 24: Overview Social Media Sub-Codes with Raw Data (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw Data on Social Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agenda Setter</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Interest Priority)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They [referring to the politically right-wing party Alternative Germany AfD] have their own digital office on almost every floor, where they are extremely direct, extremely aggressive in getting their stuff out, their messages out, and thereby also digitally annoy the established ones [parties] again and also build up pressure. (T16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feedback Tool</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Public Interest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The thing is, we only have Facebook now and no other social media channels. But it’s already an extreme channel for getting a bit of sentiment, let’s say: What topics are people concerned with? And what are they interested in? Which contribution gets the most clicks, and why? Yes, so that is a very significant renewal in lobbying, that you get the sentiments of society on a different level which you don’t really get otherwise in the classic way. (T17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Press Release</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Transparency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And we also actually asked ourselves at the beginning, because he’s...he is in his early 40s now, and we asked ourselves at the beginning the question: Which platform is still an option for us? And we also actually dealt intensively with figures at a closed meeting and dealt with the individual networks. Especially as employees, even if there was some convincing to do at the beginning. (T9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meeting Room</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Contact field)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| The intermediate result of digital communication by politicians is a larger contact field.  
Today, everything is digitally available, all contact data, you can simply write an email and the question is of course – that has already been mentioned – is the access to the MP. It is easier than ever before today due to digital transformation. (T5) |

All in all, these sub-codes are to be understood as characteristics of social media. Summarising them reveals the new role of social media as “digital gatekeeper”. A definition is needed for this novel role in lobbying.
Concerning the axial strategy code *Politics using SoMe*, the following explanation is important: The potential of social media depends on the digital mindset of the users. Participants on the political side mentioned younger MPs using social media more naturally and the future of political communication as more younger parliamentarians enter the system in the next elections. Thus, the following scopes clarify the coming change.

![Figure 36: Overview of Coming Change in Terms of Mindset (Source: Author)](image)

**Public sets Political Agenda + Political Agenda sets Lobby Agenda in Consequence**

This development leads to the result that politics sets the lobby agenda, rather than the other way around. This code means that the public’s digitally published positions dominate the political debate, after which the political debate dominates the lobbying agenda.

Political participants clearly used their political position inside the German Bundestag to establish common ground within the FGs. Across political parties and different political perspectives, the first-person plural “we” was used to demonstrate a strong position alongside lobbyists. The following quote is an example of the political self-positioned “we” versus “them”.

*I mean, we are all trained readers and have trained eyes and so a piece of influencing is within each message. Sure, they want to lobby for their own interests. But that they do very skilfully then and not clumsily, but very skilfully. And so the delegate has the feeling: “so, this information is helpful for my work on-site.” [...] That’s something..., that’s something..., that’s already going on – I would say – in the digital world. Everything else, like the main conversations, the main contact, that’s of course still through the personal channel with the MP. But these side effects... there are many. (T2)*
One of the risks or, rather, causal conditions is the resilience that was mentioned by several participants. The FGs including MPs were more open to sharing the problems and risks they see within digital lobbying than the employees in the other political FGs, for example.

4.3.3.3 Axial Coding from an Overall Perspective: Process Analysis

As FGs were held on both communicating sides, main codes and categories had to be conceptualised from each perspective so that the researcher could configure the process perspective. This third axial coding setting demonstrates the overall relationship that combines both perspectives.

![Figure 37: Paradigmatic Model Three (Source: Author)](image)

The use of Social Media as a Causal Condition

Through several coding cycles, social media was a sub-code of communication. Analysing the codes in the axial coding phase using the paradigmatic model to understand the storyline better, it became clear that digital lobbying through social media is one of the core elements. To the researcher, social media appeared to be the core issue. However, social media did not fully explain all directions, which is why the researcher continued to analyse the codes and their relationships. Of course, this mid-
way finding cannot be ignored as it shows the importance and weight of social media
use in the field. Thus, drawing conclusions from both perspectives and their perceptions
of social media revealed its actual role: the causal condition (see causal condition in
paradigmatic model 3).

**Digital Transformation as Context**
The saying “perception is reality” not only explains the overall context but also how it
functions in terms of digital transformation. Firstly, within digital transformation, social
media play a single role within the changes brought by the internet. Still, however, it
seems as if social media are perceived as a major function compared to the internet
itself. Thus, one can say that even though the most relevant changes due to digital
transformation have happened, the most influential are yet to come. Secondly, the
reason for this development is that people become the centre of communication. On
social media one follows people, not political content or policies. Thus, it is the
individual person and their personality that becomes the focus. One can say that in the
political context, digital lobbying is more about people. Consequently, digital lobbyists
are also more in the spotlight and the centre of communication, which means that
identity becomes inevitable. The intervening condition points out how most people
respond to the causal condition and, thus, transparency is the basis for identity (see the
intervening condition in Paradigmatic Model 3). Participants also talked about how their
general legitimacy or right to exist has changed for lobbyists:

… if you pulled off something there, you cemented your raison d’être in the association,
in the company or something and, and sure. Well, that’s not it anymore. That’s not
enough. I notice that. (T23)

These comments about the disappearance of the simple right to exist reflect the new
primary logic. The former top-down system does not work anymore. The consequence
is that communication itself gains new actors (see “consequence” in Paradigmatic
Model 3) and gives the system a bottom-up logic. From a “two-way lobbying street”,
social media communication leads towards a three-way communication. The organised
public – once as audience (with a max. purpose to control) – becomes an active actor in
the field. Hence, lobbying is becoming an even more complex system.
The use of Digital Lobbying as Strategy
The following quote demonstrates the political perspective about the development of lobbying to the point where the access barrier is lowered through digital transformation and, thus, results as a consequence for new actors.

But what I am concerned with, in the final analysis, is exactly the question I wanted to talk about, namely the point: If I define lobbying as something organised, no matter how much apparatus more or less or however: “an organised, structured approach to reach elected officials” – I’ll call it that now, to politics, yes – that is a definition. But if I define lobbying for me as saying that I want to influence politics for an issue, yes, um then that’s a different constellation. And then it’s already about me saying, about the digital world: “they write to me here”, through “social media”, through... through...what kind of “pressure” in quotation marks or what kind of “public” or what kind of “public pressure” I build up to influence a decision or development in one direction or the other and then that doesn’t necessarily have to have anything to do with “planned, structured, addressing politics”. Yes, but at the end of the day, I think lobby is about influencing. Yes, I mean that in a non-judgmental way, first of all. But if it’s about influencing, then I’m at the point where I say yes: it is about the whole thing, the whole kind of social media, just about...what’s happening there so to speak. It logically becomes easier. (T6)

Power Shift as a Phenomenon
One important focus of the analysis was to identify the underlying sense so that the overall phenomenon could emerge. The core aspect of this complex system is the “power shift”. Through the code power shift, all directions can be explained. Digital transformation started this shift, which changes how influence is not only perceived but also achieved in a digital lobbying setting. The following quote demonstrates how influence through lobbying and its change is perceived by an MP.

I think we’re already in the middle of the core topic. The evolution of lobbying and what lobbying actually is. The attempt to influence and to have an impact, where you influence an MP or a parliamentary group, or whether you use social power to exert influence. And what activists do is exactly that: create media attention and social pressure. For me, this is also, in the final analysis, a clever form of lobbying. (T5)
Individual participants noted changes that happen through digital transformation. Even though the groups were able to conclude certain changes (as demonstrated in the quote above), it was still difficult to explain the processes all together in an overall setting as participants mostly think in terms of their personal role. Putting the pieces together in the analysis, the researcher was able to find an explanation by adding the perspectives to each other.

The following section explains the dimensions needed to further understand the power shift and indicate how developments can be measured.

4.3.4 FG Dimensions

Looking closer into categories and subcategories, the researcher found several dimensions, ranging from formal to informal and complex to simple, which are part of the constant comparison method. The properties of the categories and phenomena and their connections referred to the dimensions that are presented in the following sections (Mey & Mruck, 2011, p. 27). Some had previously been in-vivo codes until the researcher was able to sort them between open and axial coding. The manual combination of the codes was a helpful step at this point.

4.3.4.1 Change in terms of Mindset

As more and more people organise themselves into “social media groups”, a shift from a mainly local context to an international one is observed in this analysis. Groups that maintain analogue strategies may become more isolated from digital potential, thus foregoing the chance to shape the number of active participants. At the same time, groups addressing highly globalised topics use a different skillset. While drawing a timeline, the researcher was able to categorise the changes participants talked about into short- and long-term. Participants often discussed aspects of change concerning the “other side” instead of the change concerning themselves. Looking at lobbying as a whole, one finds change that concerns only one side and is thus seen as “passive change” while other aspects affect both sides and are therefore understood as “active
change”. Thus, the many passive changes on the political side certainly initiate active change in the long term.

The following chart demonstrates these dimensions, including the actors at these different stages of change:

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 38: Dimensions of Change (Source: Author)*
The question of why the *power shift* occurs and how the shift functions is answered by asking how to be more successful. Hence, the increase in influence is the key reason that the system shifts towards digital. During the FG, several variables, such as “transparent” and “non-transparent” or “public” and “non-public”, were discussed. Another well-discussed contrast was between “individual interests” and “common good interests” in terms of “communication”. The following quotes from the lobbying agency FG discussion demonstrate the participants talking about change in influence in terms of transparency and anonymity (vs. publicly when speaking of social media posts that are public) in a digital setting:

*Lobbying etc., presupposes a certain ability to engage in dialogue, otherwise it doesn’t make sense. And that’s why you need some kind of accessibility and it has to underlie*
some anonymity. So that’s why I would say there’s a lot that happens anonymously, but I think its impact is limited. It’s just a question of definition. (T25)

…

If I now assume that this is based on the quality at the end, then this is of course strengthening and thus actually a shift to identity, because only one who is identified, only one who has the personal access, in the end also influences the decision-maker with his lobbying approach, with his message. Like that I could sign that completely. (T27)

On the one hand, anonymity, when it comes to formulating – like a growing power – a message, in order to construct a mass. And on the other hand, an identity, for example, a public lobby register. (T31)

Several digital characteristics, such as transparency and publicity, were placed in relation to different perspectives, actors, and discussed content to see their interdependence. Analysing these dimensional characteristics helped the researcher to find several connections that had not previously appeared to be related. Even though the common good perspective was clearly categorised as more influential than individual interest representation, one individual participant spoke of a shift both ways, toward the “common good” or the “individual perspective”, which uncovered the following dimensional characteristic.

…I do think that social media often brings even more opinions into the discussion and therefore changes the structure of the argument. Um, but I think that depends totally on the individual case, whether it shifts from individual interests to the common good or the other way around. I just… so, my feeling is simply that the policy discussion improves… or downgrades with more arguments that can also happen. But there are more arguments, and that’s why it already does change the argumentation structure. (T21)

After analysing these perspectives, it is important to look more closely at the actors themselves. The following dimensions explain the new actor setting.
4.3.5 FG Selective Coding: Power Shift as Final Code

The final code – also known as the core – is *power shift* and represents a general implication in any direction in which the researcher looks. All codes fit into this system. Therefore, the final code was constructed through the main codes that emerged. Digital transformation and social media change the logic of political communication and how politicians communicate. Politics and policymakers are the lobbyists’ target group. Given the target group now functions differently, it is only logical that changes for lobbyists follow. Thus, a closer look at the political sphere reveals several changes. The findings from the FGs are summarised below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of power shift</th>
<th>From…</th>
<th>Towards…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tools:</td>
<td>analogue</td>
<td>digital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media:</td>
<td>letters, phone calls, personal meetings</td>
<td>e-mails, Zoom calls, social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic:</td>
<td>non-public</td>
<td>public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door opener:</td>
<td>people</td>
<td>content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre:</td>
<td>content</td>
<td>people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition:</td>
<td>trust</td>
<td>transparency + identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currency:</td>
<td>information</td>
<td>range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk:</td>
<td>backroom information not representative</td>
<td>digital range not representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles:</td>
<td>employee as gatekeeper</td>
<td>social media as digital gatekeeper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors and communication direction:</td>
<td>lobby → politics</td>
<td>public → politics → lobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information flow:</td>
<td>inside → outside</td>
<td>outside → inside</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lobbying becomes an even more complex system (actors in Figure 25), as demonstrated in the shift from the former two-way street to three-way communication. The public, as
the former audience (with a max. purpose to control) becomes the most active actor in the digital field (communication direction in Figure 9). Digital lobbying is about people and thus results in more new actors (centre in Figure 9). Consequently, classic actors need to learn the new digital rules to continue playing within the field (tools in Figure 9). Even though some participants said that digital transformation does not yet affect all actors, the analysis revealed that it opens up a new field for lobbying. Currently, not all actors are located within this new field, which is why a transition phase with long-term changes was identified. It is clear that in the long run, a stronger identity is necessary in (digital) lobbying. The shift from analogue to digital tools enhances transparency. Ultimately, digital transparency can lead towards a stronger digital identity (condition in Figure 9) in terms of people and new actors. This development in the digital age is new to the business and demands new regulations and definitions. Especially since the information flows from the outside into the system (inside) and not the other way anymore.

Social media are transforming from a mere communication channel into their new role as digital gatekeeper, with several characteristics: agenda setter, feedback tool, contact platform, and information channel (roles in Figure 9). Social media are not only used to establish new contacts or maintain existing ones but, more importantly, for information gathering. Lobbyists inform themselves about political actions and positions and strategically prepare their meetings by gaining more in-depth information through feedback from the public. The political side, too, uses comments and likes from the public to measure and evaluate how certain topics are perceived digitally (= feedback information). The major risk that emerges from such digital “measurement” is representativeness (risks in Figure 9). Transparency does not automatically stand for an equal factor of representation. Neither the former backroom communications that rarely dealt with representative information (but, rather, information about those who were able to afford more interest representation) nor the digital setting offers a guarantee of representativeness (due to a misleading range of those who have a better digital skillset).

All in all, digital transformation and social media cause a power shift whereby lobbying influence works differently in a digital setting, enhancing digital lobbying.
4.3.6 Theoretical Sampling and Analytic Induction of FGs

Throughout the analysis of the FGs, the researcher continued to widen her reading since theoretical sampling shows the researcher when to further develop emerging categories, which is why it is a key procedure for theory building in GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The most important findings of the theoretical sampling process are:

1) Communication direction – principal agent theory;
2) Bottom-up logic due to public involvement – citizen lobby;
3) Co-existence of two systems – ambidexterity theory.

This important step in GT helped the researcher to identify the theoretical relevance of the emerging theoretical pieces of the final model. This key element of GTM is demonstrated in the following three sections to connect the FG results and overall context of the thesis to existing literature in the field.

1) Communication direction – principal agent theory

Going back to the literature while coding the actors of lobbying communication, the researcher came across the well-known “principal-agent problem” also known as the “theory of agency”, which emerged in the 1970s. Several authors and researchers claim to be founders of the theory, including Stephen A. Ross, Barry M. Mitnick, Michael C. Jensen, William H. Meckling, and Eugene F. Fama (Schieder, 2017, p. 59). Academics agree that its origin lie in the economic theory of agency (Ross, 1973) which then further developed into an institutional theory of agency (Mitnick, 2019). The principal is the contractor and the agent the contracted person. The relationship is based on an information asymmetry, because agents usually have a knowledge advantage. This knowledge could either be used in favour of or against the principal, which is risky. Furthermore, it is assumed that the interests of principal and agent are not the same; rather, agents try to increase their benefits (Schieder, 2017, p. 59). All in all, the theory offers a model to explain how relationships and hierarchies can work in terms of lobbying.
A common opinion is that lobbyists are the secret “string pullers” behind politicians (Gammelin & Hamann, 2005; Gammelin & Löw, 2014); hence, the real principals in the political sphere. One US study explored how lobbying works in terms of ethical aspects based on a principal-agent theory model which saw lobbyists as agents of their employing principals. The lobby agents were even evaluated as being “pressured by legislators and competitor groups to make compromises” because “interest group members depend on them to know what is going on” (Holyoke, 2017, p. 273). An unequal principal-agent relationship is proven, and it is suggested that this problem of information asymmetry can be counteracted by an ethical reform “so that lobbyists can fulfil their First Amendment-protected role” (Holyoke, 2017, p. 273). In Germany, however, a crucial empirical publication analysed different forms of principal-actor relationships whereby lobbyists are understood as agents and private service providers in the areas of (commercial) lobbying as principals (Schieder, 2017, p. 69), both of which (together) target the political actors.

With the findings of a new communication direction in this study, the researcher concludes that the former classic assumption of principal (lobbyists) and agent (politician) roles switch in a digital setting. Additionally, a new principal enters the field (the public) and turns around the given situation. With the context of digital lobbying in mind, the former agent (politician) becomes a principal (as in the US example). Consequently, the former principal needs to adapt so that they do not become the new agent (lobbyists). It is important to add the gatekeeper role that was included in this research. Figure 26 demonstrates the new setting of this classic assumption according to this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Gatekeeper</th>
<th>Agent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Public</td>
<td>Social Media as Digital Gatekeeper</td>
<td>Member of Parliament (MP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Member of Parliament (MP)</td>
<td>Employee as Political Gatekeeper (and internal agent of the MP)</td>
<td>Lobbyists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2) **Bottom-up logic due to public involvement – citizens’ lobby**

The FGs revealed a reversed communication direction and a stronger public participation (bottom-up logic) in digital settings. The researcher therefore looked for literature in that field and found that digital communication had numerous implications in terms of political participation. One rather new theory drew the researcher’s attention within the large amount of political participation literature due to its strong appeal to and direct connection with lobbying. Alberto Alemanno’s (2018) work is based on the question of how to make a better society. The author tries to “turn all of us citizens into lobbyists” (Alemanno, 2018), which represents a further development regarding the public and outcome of this research. The public becomes not just the starting point of interest representation but also the centre. Alemanno explains that after “a crisis of faith” in democracies, citizens need to stand up for themselves. In his opinion, “lobbying is not only legitimate but is also essential in a democracy”, which is why he believes that it is the citizens who should “set the agenda and prompt policymakers to act, or react to a policymaker’s agenda with potential solutions” (Alemanno, 2018). His bottom-up form of lobbying reflects the researchers’ results in terms of the German context in this analysis. An employee, for example, spoke of more public involvement through digital communication channels:

*I believe that digital channels make it much easier to communicate the interests of the general public that are being lobbied for, because they can of course take place much more publicly and are somehow more interesting for a broader mass of people. (T11)*

Many scholars have looked into the idea of the internet and the process of digital communication as a tool for non-profit organizations in recent years. Furthermore, as more and more people organise themselves into “social media groups”, a shift from a mainly local context to an international one is observed in this analysis. Groups that maintain analogue strategies may become more isolated from the digital potential, foregining the chance to shape the number of active participants. European scholars also confirm that, in fact, influencing begins from understanding opinions of and attitudes towards an argument. They further point out that the notion of these understandings comes from the public interest; hence, it is crucial for lobbying to gather from the public in order to build alliances (Ihlen et al., 2020, p. 5). All in all, the “citizens’ lobby”
proves that the ideas and communication direction found among the FGs are relevant in other contexts as well.

3) **Co-existence of two systems – ambidexterity theory**

Digital communication in politics has taken on a new dimension in terms of scale and range in the age of social media. However, not all actors work and think within this new digital logic. Finding digital and non-digital mindsets, especially in regard to social media use, led the researcher toward the theory of ambidexterity, which stands for the parallel existence of two systems. The term has been in use since 1976 and was shaped by scholars such as Michael Tushman, Charles A. O’Reilly, and Julian Birkinshaw (O’Reilly III & Tushman, 2013).

Seeing lobbying as working under two systems, the old, or classic, analogue lobbying and the new digital lobbying logic, brought the researcher to the question of whether one system replaced the other or both could continue in parallel (and, if so, for how long).

The current situation is interpreted as a “transition phase”, leading towards a further digitised system due to more digital natives entering the political sphere with each election. Most current actors are still not digital natives, depending on support in social media and digital communication in general. Thus, classic actors are working in parallel with new actors. This division or dual function is explained by the theory of ambidexterity, which suggests that a system must be able to do two things at the same time in order to adapt in the long term. In a digital setting, in particular, it is crucially important to be able to act “efficiently and flexibly” (Kirf et al., 2020, p. 88). However, the two tasks require completely opposite framework conditions (O’Reilly III & Tushman, 2013).

The idea of contextual ambidexterity in organizations indicates that “the ambidextrous organization achieves alignment in its current operations while also adapting effectively to changing environmental demands” (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004, p. 210). In accordance with this theory, the researcher concludes that lobbyists must have the ability to simultaneously pursue both classic and digital lobbying during this transition.
phase. It is important to adapt to digital transformation effectively in order not to lose influence, as the function of the lobbying environment has changed.

4.3.7 Comparison of First and Second Data Rounds

A comparison of the data-gathering rounds (interviews and FGs) shows several similarities. Since the findings of the interviews were used as prompts for the FGs, participants further developed initial aspects such as transparency, digital communication, and digital lobbying in general. The group dimensions demonstrated that the results of the interviews fell on fruitful ground; however, the intense discussions also revealed that not all positions were the same.

Transparency was one major topic, for example, that the researcher identified as “tool or attitude” after the first data-gathering round. The interviews revealed a strong focus on the topic, but only through the FGs was the researcher able to understand that the actor’s role determines how transparency is lived. In the context of Germany, lobbyists use transparency more as a tool in digital lobbying, while federal politicians see transparency more as a duty and attitude when publishing their parliamentarian actions and positions. Hence, a combination of data rounds provided a full understanding of transparency as a strategy.

The comparison of the social media codes showed stronger differences. The results from both data-gathering rounds indicate that the participants were working in different “times”. Participants in the FGs were included after the first Covid-19 lockdown, during which no personal meetings were allowed. Consequently, social media use had gained much more weight in practice and was therefore “normal” whereas during the interviews many participants still said that digital communication channels and, in particular, social media were not at all relevant to the business. Thus, one misconception was that digital transformation has no impact on lobbying.

After the interviews, the researcher concluded that these first findings did not contribute to a full understanding of the field and suggested increasing the dialogue on digital lobbying. The FGs were the important second step to not only validate first findings but also enrich parts where there was less data to better connect perspectives. The following
section demonstrates the final model constructed through the process of both data-gathering rounds.

4.4 Creation of a Lobbying Process Model

To theorise the original findings of the lobbying process regarding the communication directions, it is important to compress the discussed steps and functions. Corbin and Strauss explain clearly that “A theorist works with conceptualizations of data, not the actual data per se. Theories can’t be built with actual incidents or activities as observed or reported; that is, from raw data” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7). Therefore, the following process model is the result of all coding rounds and symbolises the final code in this thesis: power shift. The model demonstrates the most important contribution to research: how lobbying worked before social media (blue) and how it works now in a digital setting (red).

![Figure 40: Final Process Model of Power Shift (Source: Author)](image)

The “old” analogue setting stands for classic lobbying communication. Thereby, the results of the former, mainly non-transparent, backroom communication – including position papers from lobby to politics – are presented as consultancy outcomes to the public, while the “new” digital setting enables the opposite communication direction. Now, public opinion can be published directly and transparently through social media, which influences the political agenda. Politics adapt to these opinions or, this public opinion dominates the political. The lobby, in turn, measures public opinion strategically through opinion/sentiment polls via social media channels to understand public arguments.
The overall communication logic functions differently in a digital setting. This development is new in the classic lobbying business and demands new regulations and definitions for lobbying in the digital age. Since politics or, more precisely, policymakers – the target group of lobbyists – function differently in this new setting, it is only a matter of time before more changes follow for lobbyists in the digital age.

The “power shift” turns around the lobbying communication process through transparency via social media. The result is that the overall direction of lobby communication changes in a digital setting. The public uses social media extensively and takes advantage of the larger contact field with politicians. Thereby, the organised public becomes a new lobby actor. Subsequently, more lobbyists are starting to use social media. First steps are being taken, more experiences are being gathered, and the first digital lobbyists are already working within this new logic.

Digital communication in politics has taken on a new dimension in terms of scale and range in the age of social media. Social media and all their communication channels have become very important, functioning like digital gatekeepers. This new role demands a new definition, particularly since transparency and identity are necessary in social media and, thus, to successful digital lobbying. Classic gatekeepers (employees of MPs) strengthen their role in the current transition phase in which most MPs are still not digital natives, depending on support to use social media and digital communication. Their role continues to be important, demanding more planning and adjusting to be authentic towards the audience. Therefore, it is important to integrate employees as classic gatekeepers into communication strategies, for politicians as well as for lobbyists. Thus, a definition of classic gatekeepers is also necessary.

4.4.1 Final Outcome: Key Changes through Digital Lobbying

The following points summarise the findings and key changes through digital transformation.

A. Digital transformation and social media do have an effect on lobbying. They create more transparency and change the factors for successful lobbying.
B. The public becomes a decisive factor in the former two-way street communication: The public influences politics which, in turn, sets the conditions for lobbying.

C. The changed conditions are more easily adapted by new players than old ones (due to their digital mindset) and thus cause a power shift from old actors to new actors and from backroom communication to social media communication.

Social media communication has enabled a new process in terms of digital lobbying. Even though social media only play a minor role within digital transformation – compared to all changes due to the internet – it still seems that social media are perceived as the most influential so far. Thus, the researcher concludes that even though the most relevant changes of digital transformation have probably already happened for communication businesses like lobbying, the most influential are yet to come.

4.4.2 Concept of Digital Lobbying

The study found additional aspects of the novel concept of digital lobbying and demonstrates how such aspects have created further knowledge in this section.

In the past, lobbyists mainly influenced politicians through the non-transparent process of “trading” non-public information, after which politicians tried to convince the public to accept the decisions taken. Today, information is increasingly shared publicly and with society. Consequently, lobbyists are losing their core function of trading non-public information. Thus, public communication affects the “exchange of information” in terms of what is exchanged. The former exchange, often described as “barter” (Wehrmann, 2007, p. 24), which took place within non-public conversations, cannot be pursued in the same way in the digital age. Old lobby actors thereby risk losing their exclusive value as information traders. Politicians thereby become stronger in agendasetting, but it is the public that initially and ultimately influences politics in this digital and public process. This process, in turn, leads to politics setting the framework for both lobbyists and the public at the same time. This reverse process only becomes possible through transparency, which is the foundation of “digital lobbying”.

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The results regarding digital lobbying should not be confused with grassroots lobbying. It is therefore important to emphasise the differences between the two, even though they may seem similar at first glance. Grassroots lobbying is driven by a broad support movement based on “collective protest action” (Röttger et al., 2020, p. 4) such as demonstrations or human chains. Even though it now has digital elements, such as online petitions, grassroots lobbying originates primarily from an analogue era. As a result of this study, digital lobbying is understood as a purely digitally-based action, which can also include the goal of analogue conversations but is organised digitally. The biggest difference, however, is that it does not have to be a supporter movement; nor does it have to have a protest as its starting point.

Moreover, the development of digital lobbying in terms of actors was discussed intensively in the company lobbying FG, where two participants stayed longer to further comment and exchange ideas. It must be explained that the structural changes which lead to new lobbying actors in the system of interest representation have taken place for various reasons throughout history. In the former German capital, Bonn, it was mainly associations that bundled, represented, and mediated the interests of their members towards the government and parliament. In the course of time, the structural necessity of new forms of interest representation and mediation arose, which is why a multitude of actors with different rationales of action, approaches, and instruments became active (Schieder, 2017, p. 3). Digital communication, in turn, changes the structural preconditions and possibilities, which is why a change in actors must be analysed since everyone is theoretically able to use digital tools. The following quote from an association lobbyist explains the process to this point.

…I completely agree with you. But that’s nothing new in our industry either. We had a similar situation in the 1990s, when the Bundestag moved to Berlin. This is always a good example: In Bonn, I would say – you are too young to know this – the associations were the big players. When the transfer to Berlin took place, all the companies and law firms joined in. And that wasn’t exactly easy for the associations either, they weren’t exactly thrilled about it either, so of course it’s now shifting again into the realm of activists, or whatever. But this is not a new situation in the sense that it is new, but not really new.
Of course, digital transformation, especially for activists, will make it easier for them to join forces, that’s also completely clear. Funnily enough, this pandemic has ensured, at least in recent months, that the position of the associations has actually been strengthened once again, because politicians and ministries have had to limit their exchanges. Companies have suffered a bit as a result, I’m saying that in general of course. But again, of course, these changes within the lobbying sector…we can complain about them, yes, but we simply have to deal with them. (T19)

Indeed, as presented in the literature review, scholars have summed up changes in actors affecting the traditional role of associations as a more complex situation, especially since actors in fields such as PA overlap in practice (Priddat & Speth, 2007, p. 11). It is therefore understandable that, due to structural changes such as the move from Bonn to Berlin or even due to current digital circumstances in terms of communication, actors have to adapt.

This explanatory approach in terms of new actors will be discussed further in the following and last chapter.

4.5 Summary

The past sections presented the analysis of data that resulted in new knowledge. The findings present novel information on the outcome of digital transformation and in particular social media on lobbying. The process model gets to the heart of the change: the effect between the involved actors is a changing communication direction. It became obvious that a central point for all actors is transparency. This explanatory approach in terms of new actors will be discussed further in the following and last chapter. The next sections review the final model according to literature and existing theories and models, as well as limitation and contribution to practice and research.
5 Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how digital transformation and, in particular, social media affect lobbying at the German federal level and concludes by offering a lobbying process model. The first step was a literature review of existing lobbying research as well as the first digital lobbying analyses, as this novel discipline is only just starting to develop in the German literature. The focus lies on the communication challenges for both lobbyists and politicians due to digital transformation. Thus, the conclusion was drawn that digital communication exists in the field, resulting in new questions regarding consequences and functions, and that transparency is a key discussion in practice as well as theory.

The chapter on methodology presented the research approach, which derived from the gaps identified by the literature review (GTM was chosen for this pilot study). Chapter 4 presented the implementation if this research approach. Chapter 5 discusses the findings (Section 5.1), presents answers to the RQs (Section 5.2), debates limitations and quality criteria, elaborating on important issues such as sampling, validity, and generalizability (Section 5.3), and presents the unique contributions of this research, concluding with suggestions for further study (Section 5.4).

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge about the lobbying process in times of digital transformation. The findings explain how lobbying communication functions in an analogue and digital setting and sheds further light on the changing role of the organised public as a new digital lobbying actor. The shift to digital is substantially changing strategic communication between lobbying actors and brings forth new strategic options for lobbying in practice.

5.1 Discussion of Results

The continuous developments enabled by digital transformation, as described by Zerfass et al. (2017), suggested an analysis of lobbying in the digital setting would be fruitful. Indeed, the results of this study confirm not only a “shift, in terms of increased speed, impact, reach, and efficiency” (Lindgren, 2017, p. 294) but also the increasing publication possibilities enabled by social media, and the resulting information flow and more active involvement of public actors, as Thimm and Einspänner (2012) have
explained. More importantly, the findings of this study explain the consequence of these developments which were concluded in a process model.

The process model puts a strong emphasis on the lobbying communication direction. As described in the literature review, the working definition of lobbying is based on a two-way communication process (Milbrath, 1960) which is a combination also based on Lasswell’s “two-way communication” regarding mass communication between government and society (Lasswell, 1948, p. 220). However, the model shows that the former direction was actually not as public and thus, did not bear such reference to mass communication at all. Only through digital communication and social media Lasswell’s idea ultimately finds practical confirmation. Consequently, the working definition for digital lobbying that is based on classic lobbying enriched with digital, more media oriented elements, proves to be in accordance with the created process model:

A digital communication process between users and policymakers circulating information through a dialogue-oriented mediation (Müller, 2019) via digital and especially social media. On the one hand, the objective is to represent common interests, convey a fast, innovative, and transparent image (Müller, 2019), and mobilise others; on the other, it is to demonstrate political attention and the transparency of the policymaking process.

Bimber and Copeland (2013) for example discuss how everyone can talk to everyone through social media and also Zerfaß and Pleil (2012) state earlier on that reaching politicians and their employees changed in terms of time exposure, dialogic capability, personalization, and in effort, but yet, no concrete information could be found on the consequences on lobbying. The analysis of the interviews shows that the shift to digital brings about a new level of contact, the new direct level between the public and political actors which consequently affects the relationship between policymakers and lobbyists since a new actor enters the field.

Digital transformation not only changes how society communicates, as the internet enables everyone to publish anything (Fleisher, 2012), it also changes how policymakers communicate with lobbyists and vice versa. This analysis confirms that digital communication has arrived in the political sphere as Dubois and Martin-Bariteau
(2020) just recently specified and moreover, political institutions increasingly use social media channels to communicate with citizens. Hence, information is no longer circulated between policymakers and lobbyists only (before becoming public), information is now based on public communication and thus directly affects successful lobbying. In a digital setting the public becomes a decisive factor in the former two-way street communication: the public enjoys a new proximity to politics which influences the political agenda and, in turn, sets the conditions for lobbying. Transparency thereby dominates the relationship between the actors which stands for another indicator how in a digital setting, conditions for creating and maintaining trust are transformed (Blöbaum, 2016, p. vi).

As described in the literature review, there is only limited empirical evidence how social media is used specifically in lobbying. Individual studies showed how first interest groups – non-profit and profit actors – communicate digitally and use social media as a tool (Kammerer, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The discussion of digital tools and strategies, as well as digital communication in general, evolved further and reached a new level organically within the timeframe of this thesis. When the second data-gathering round started in July 2020, there was a quite open attitude towards digital events in Germany. Most companies and institutions had their employees working from home so participants were used to digital meetings. They were also aware that the idea behind this change was radical and different, especially compared to the business of lobbying. Participants from the lobbying side reported that when they reached out to politics digitally, they now felt a more positive response due to the digital boost in the “year of Covid-19”. This change appeared to happen through the acceptance of home office and digital networks, which implied more digital experiences such as online conversations. These events also became important sources of digital ideas and strategies that elevated politics to do more. The following quote demonstrates one participant’s experience:

*I do think that Covid-19 has changed things a bit in this context. What I’m seeing is that, um, people are very willing to simply sit down in front of their computers for an hour and talk to you, and that it’s suddenly much easier than having to arrange a face-to-face appointment through office employees in the past. So, if you were to look at this as part of the digital transformation, I think Covid-19 has made it much easier. So, I*
also just had, here at our meetings within the association, it’s super easy to get people directly. They suddenly call beforehand and want to chat with you about what they should say. They would never have done that in the past at the face-to-face meetings, that they call beforehand and talk to you about it. Um, they are also very alert. So, my experience with them has been very positive. (T22)

Another Covid-19 experience in terms of personal digital meetings was given by another association lobbyist.

And on the subject of Covid-19, I will log out. What the colleague T22 said – I can sign that. We are not hip and cool as a XY association, but we have had the same experience that we suddenly get personal meetings with people whom we used to chase for half a year and who are suddenly available and up for it. So, everything has its good side. (T24)

Rasmussen (2020) raises a crucial question on the LSE blog: “How has Covid-19 changed lobbying activity across Europe?” Assuming that digital competencies are learned and better used due to the “Covid-19 digital transformation boost”, the power shift might turn around again as old actors will learn the same digital competence as new ones.

At the same time, a concrete meaning and understanding of digital lobbying as a practice and its potential impact were still difficult to define for most of the interviewees in this study. In the first data-gathering round (interviews in 2019) for this study, politicians and their employees mostly connected success and power with classic lobbying means rather than digital ones. Lobbyists, however, mentioned digital communication strategies in the targeting methods they described. This different description showed a first discrepancy between the communicating sides.

The more transparent, dialogue-oriented image of digital lobbying described by Müller (2019) was recognised by both participating sides in this study in relation to changes in digital communication, rather than in the context of digital lobbying. Einspänner’s (2010) argument that social media platforms are considered to lead to a stronger public presence was also confirmed by participants in the interviews as well as in the FGs, just not in the context of digital lobbying. Even though knowledge of these practices exists
naturally, they were not connected. Here, contrary to communication with the political field, which is, as a whole, seen as something in transformation, lobbying, which is inevitably influenced by its original form, is mostly not actively perceived in a digital context.

The communicative way in which lobbyists used to negotiate in interactions with policymakers, described by many scholars (Ihlen et al., 2018; Klüver, Mahoney, et al., 2015; Nothhaft, 2017), and the presented developed process model have a communication logic in common. Based on the understanding that lobbyists try to convince policymakers of their interests, both conceptual ideas are based on the same communication direction. The empirical model, however, includes the new, digital lobbying communication direction. This means that it not only demonstrates the traditional analogue direction but also the new communication logic which has arisen due to social media and increasing transparency. The new direction is based on data obtained from several lobbying actors and therefore expands former studies that only concentrated on one type of actor (Kentrup et al., 2013).

Furthermore, since the organised public becomes an active actor in the digital lobbying setting, the findings in this study support Raknes and Ihlen (2018, p. 2), who speak of increasing lobbying success through a “stable entity” in terms of interest groups.

The argument that a greater democratic framework for lobbying is enabled through public involvement (Hillebrand, 2017) cannot be backed, as comments only scratched the surface of society and democracy at this point. To examine the possibilities of a democratic framework appropriately, transparency has to be discussed involving the public.

5.2 Findings based upon Research Questions

This GTM approach allowed the researcher to provide a more extensive empirical account of the complex concept of lobbying in times of digital transformation. By relying on the political and the lobby perspectives, the study was able to make robust findings, draw more reliable conclusions and create a final and holistic model. The
combined analysis allowed the researcher to gain a better sense of the varying perspectives of different lobbying actors and communicating sides. Thus, answers to the RQs are as follows.

RQ 1: In what ways do policymakers and lobbyists relate to each other?

Policymakers and lobbyists directly relate to each other. The two-way communication refers to a closed relationship between policymakers and lobbyists as predominant communicating actors. Thus, information is distributed inside this closed circle that can – depending on the strategy – involve several organized groups (like in grassroots lobbying, outside lobbying) but information dominantly flows from lobbyists, trying to negotiate in interactions, towards policymakers. In total, information comes from inside the circle that includes policymakers and lobbyists and flows outside into the public after decisions are taken. However, through digital transformation this inner circle is broken up, communication processes change and influence the setting for a relationship between the actors. Policymakers and lobbyists now also relate on a third actor: the public and thus, raise the question on the consequences.

RQ 2: How do digital transformation and social media in particular affect lobbying at German federal level?

Digital transformation and social media do have an impact on lobbying, by affecting the relationship between policymakers and lobbyist. Through social media communication the public perception of political topics, the public’s role, and the use of public channels affect the former communication setting. The classic lobbying process changes in terms of transparency, thus starting a power shift. The power shift, in terms of influence, moves from analogue to digital tools. The result is that public actors enter the field. Currently, a transition phase with short-term changes can be seen, which will be followed by further long-term changes regarding the communication process for lobbying at German national level. This change is massive, since communicating information plays an outstanding role in democracies. It is the access to the entire spectrum of policy-related information - which is possible in principle – as well as the active creation of such, that is an important prerequisite forming the political will of the people (Emmer, 2019a, p. 371).
RQ 3: What characterises digital lobbying, and how do classic lobbying and digital lobbying coexist?

Digital lobbying works within a novel logic, due to the public context of social media. Social media, as the driver of an information society, transmit the public opinion which sets the political agenda. The consequence is that lobbyists can no longer compete with the public’s influence on politics. Hence, digital lobbying is about transparency, which develops public opinion and, in turn, shapes the political. Thereby, participation of the public becomes a new starting point since the representation of the public can reach a greater space. Hence, the main characteristic of digital lobbying is the organised public, which is becoming a new and active part of lobbying.

While transparency and publicity both seem to oppose classic lobbying, digital lobbying will not necessarily supersede classic lobbying; rather, the two can coexist in organizational settings. Thus, the two communication logics can emerge concurrently, but can survive inside one setting. The identified long-term changes might, however, change the setting later.

5.3 Limitations and Quality Criteria

This study seeks to generate reliable data in accordance with the principles of transparency and sincerity (Tracy, 2010). Consequently, the limitations of the study and its ethical aspects have to be discussed. Considering that the research context always affects the researcher, it must be acknowledged that the culture and structure of the researcher’s work experience have shaped the overall study (Costley et al., 2010). This is especially true for the ethnographic parts of the study but also for the participating interviewees, since subjectivity naturally influences the methods chosen. Consequently, the researcher reflected on the interviews with friends, supervisors, and other PhD students.

Qualitative research is further criticised for the (lack of) generalizability of such influenced findings, as they belong to unique situations (Firestone, 1993). McGrath (2005) further stresses the risk that practitioners hesitate to share secrets or be transparent about them to an outsider. However, the researcher’s work in parliament, as well as her former work in a lobbying agency, actually enabled her to speak to and understand many different people at the heart of the political system and the lobbying
world. The researcher gained a look behind the scenes – even of not directly studied settings – so the added inside perspectives allowed her to contribute several reflexive layers to the analysis. Thereby, using GTM was the basis of the interpretivist stance taken, whereby the data was interpreted according to given frames in order to bring it together to “construct” the final model. Nevertheless, the researcher tried at all times to respect the individual answers and perspectives of all participants in this study without exploiting the data.

The data in this research is challenged according to the concepts of validity and reliability, which have a long tradition in quantitative research. The essence of reliability for qualitative research lies in consistency. In this sense, the researcher has verified the accuracy, in terms of form and context, through constant comparison of the data, which is especially important for (group) interview sets (Leung, 2015). Of course, it has to be said that if the study were to be repeated, it would be unlikely to generate exactly the same answers. The intention of this study is to achieve a more analytical generalizability, which means understanding data that supports – without final proof – a generalised idea (Firestone, 1993). More precisely, Firestone explains that exact replications of a study “are most useful for establishing reliability. When conditions vary, successful replication contributes to generalizability. Similar results under different conditions illustrate the robustness of the finding” (Firestone, 1993, p. 17). As the data from the first round (interviews) is contested in a second round (FGs), the findings are tested to ensure a robust path for generalization back to theory, which, similarly, includes the aspect of external validity.

Regarding validity in general, Guba and Lincoln say that “no one would argue that a single method – or collection of methods – is the royal road to ultimate knowledge” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 205). Therefore, validity as the broadest possible control of the research context and conditions in qualitative research means investigating the “appropriateness” of the tools, processes, and data (Leung, 2015). Due to Covid-19, remarks regarding the FGs must be made, since the number of participants suffered under the restrictions as well as the possibility of having personal conversations. Moreover, the conditions for lobbying changed in 2020 due to Covid-19 regulations, affecting “appropriateness”.

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It has to be said that the FGs were not actively enriched by ethnographic data since the researcher had no working experience in associations and companies who lobby. Consequently, the researcher decided not to unequally edit some FGs.

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- Prof Dr Lars Rademacher – Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences.

who discussed the main ideas and the general line of thought throughout the years and helped the researcher in terms of content, methodology, analysis, interviewees, findings, codes, and positionality. Through personal meetings at Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences or on Zoom, these conversations helped the researcher reflect and guided her through the research process (even though she mostly left the meetings with more questions than she had arrived with).

Furthermore, the researcher constantly discussed her topic and, in particular, the results with friends from other business or research contexts to enrich her thinking and challenge herself to narrow it down. Friends and contacts from the business also enriched the researcher’s understanding through continuous discussions of the developments. The most intensive help was given by her boyfriend who was able to challenge the researcher and reflect with her, including on her memos and notes from working in the German Bundestag. He also coded interview parts where it was difficult for the researcher to compare different mindsets of the participants. He also helped the researcher to reorganised the FG coding tree. The researcher is especially thankful for this tremendous help as it supported her thinking and reflection process in an extremely fruitful way (even though he might have suffered a little during the brainstorming sessions which helped the researcher sort out her thoughts).

5.3.1 Validity and Reliability of Interviews

Since the researcher played a dual role in this study, it is important to discuss limitations and ethical aspects in the context of an “insider- researcher” perspective. While part of the research took place “within the researcher’s own work practice”, (Costley et al., 2010, p. 1) and GT has been criticised for forcing data by preconception (Thornberg &
Dunne, 2019, p. 2), the researcher decided not to include former direct colleagues in the sample. The researcher did not want to be biased or jeopardise the results due to personal relationships. At the same time, the researcher used her former contacts to recruit lobbyists for interview. The political interviews were requested without any indication or knowledge of the researcher’s position in parliament. This information was only shared during the interviews as a sort of “ice breaker” to prompt trust and conversation.

In GTM, every interview partner is chosen individually. The political interview partners were chosen by committee and in consideration of their personal matters. The idea, in terms of this sampling method, was to be neutral towards party affiliation, gender, and employee status. The lobby interview partners were also pre-selected, however not after each interview. Thus, a limitation is concomitant since every interview should traditionally be analysed before the next interview partner is chosen.

As mentioned before, the greatest disadvantage of interviews is, of course, the researcher’s reliance on the correctness of the responses given (Leung, 2015). Then again, a major advantage of interviews is the possibility to ask questions and try to verify answers, which was extremely important given the topic suffers from such strong negative connotations. Some interviewees were resistant at the beginning and only through a comfortable dialogue were they willing to set aside their initial resentment and engage in constructive conversation. Another aspect is today’s fast-changing world. Regarding digital transformation, it was important that the researcher included interviewees of different ages and experience levels so that the sampling and data analysis were appropriate.

Due to the busy schedules of the MPs, the researcher had to combine face-to-face interviews with phone interviews, which could also be considered a limitation of the study. The phone interviews were shorter than the face-to-face interviews. Visual indicators might have grounded a deeper conversation (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Furthermore, the researcher stuck to theoretical aspects and recoded the data to focus on the main concepts of the interviews. It must be mentioned that some categories mirror aspects and overall topics of the interview guide that the researcher used in the chosen half-standardised interview format. Nevertheless, the researcher believes the chosen
methodology enabled her to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. A basis of trust gave the interviews and all conversations a competitive edge in sincerity, which incorporates authenticity and genuineness (Tracy, 2010).

The reciprocal relationship between understanding a phenomenon and coding became evident when working with the transcripts in several rounds (Weston et al., 2001). Finally, when new aspects evolved, they helped to transform the researcher’s understanding, which also confirms the value of the chosen approach. The researcher worked very intensively, thinking of the field and looking at the literature as she wanted to verify and check the context of the analysis and first findings. The researcher confirms that these comparisons guided her towards publication topics while remaining open to aspects of the overall thesis.

5.3.2 Validity and Reliability of Focus Groups

A hermeneutical perspective was taken to truly understand the given information. To take analytical decisions in this philosophical tradition, the process of constantly asking and following quality criteria is mandatory. For the overall findings, in particular, it is important to check whether concepts are systematically related while considering external factors and whether the theoretical findings have significance for the research overall.

Through the ability to understand, insights are created that reveal how people give meaning to their business world. It is the group dialogue and discourse that share the idea of hermeneutics (Chioncel et al., 2003). Habermas (1981) speaks in his theory of communicative action of “objective” or “radical” hermeneutics. What he means by this is that, “on the one hand, it should be clear that the social sciences inevitably have to take an interpretative stand, which implies that they can only clarify reality while participating in it; on the other, a reformulation of the objectivity principle is needed” (Chioncel et al., 2003, p. 499). In order to ensure both perspectives, the researcher took a double role as moderator-researcher to actively participate in and be able to look deeply inside the data creation while also ensuring objectivity through GTM, where one works with codes developed over time rather than raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These aspects considered, the hermeneutic tradition underlines the value of discourse and the meaning of FGs.
To reveal new insights and, thus, to reach the purpose of research, academia has to find the truth about an objective reality (Chioncel et al., 2003, p. 500). To confirm the truth of the used data – in this case the FG data – popular concepts proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are used. These researchers proposed the much-appreciated concepts of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to debate the value of findings.

### Table 27: Adapted Concepts of Lincoln and Guba (Source: Author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Adapted concept in this research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility:</td>
<td>it is believable that the overall results match the perspective of the participants in this research. These were identified and recruited specifically according the research focus and are thus also credible actors. Concerning the data, several coding rounds were undertaken while the researcher also went back to the original data, as stated below, to ensure the connection between the results and the analyses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability:</td>
<td>is given in terms of generalised or transferred results from the two perspectives, political and lobby, which were transferred into an overall process analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability:</td>
<td>leads to replicability and can be found within the process as a high number of FGs was held. Following Corbin and Strauss (1990) and their perspective on GT, at some point analysing one’s data reveals events or actions through which categories emerge. Through the final step, these categories later led to the recommendations for practice that can be found in Section 5.4.2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmability:</td>
<td>is found by comparing results to other research findings. The results can be seen in the last part of this chapter of theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling subsequently guided the researcher and helped evaluating the categories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of validity, it is also important to say that the FGs discussed the outcome of the first interviews held for this research. Considering this bigger picture, the FGs were feedback on the individual interviews. As FGs are seen as a “way of listening to people
and learning from them” (Chioncel et al., 2003, p. 504), they actually play a double role in this research. Collected data has to meet all quality criteria; Thus, a complete analysis of the collected data is ethically and methodologically necessary.

Regarding FGs, it is important not to under-analyse participants. In terms of the validity of the participants, in particular, the group conclusions need to be analysed alongside the individual voices so that neither mislead the researcher. “Group thinking” might impact collective striving for unanimity, leading to results that ignore certain individual information (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Willis et al., 2009). Accordingly, it is the moderator’s duty to ensure that if a consensus is reached, individual – maybe opposing – voices are also heard and considered. The audio tapes used for transcription allowed the researcher to doublecheck interpretive validity so that no one would be overlooked.

This analysis, being contextual and not statistical, accentuates qualitative research compared to frequency when analysing statistically for example. Therefore, it was important to include both genders and also all fractions so that no political bias would occur. This was especially important in order to gain competent answers to the RQ, providing a whole range of high-quality responses. Four political parties participated in the FGs, and every FG included men and women.

All in all, writing this analysis chapter in particular requires a balance between descriptive and theoretical validity. The direct connotations of the FG participants as well as the scientific interpretations of the connotations led to the final conclusion. However, the researcher has not been able to consider “unofficial” new lobby groups that represent their own interests, such as Fridays For Future, the Farmers Movement in Germany, or other movements first hand as they refused to engage in a lobbying research project.

5.4 Contributions

This thesis sets out to explain the role of digital transformation in lobbying. Its most important contribution lies in the findings of combined perspectives determining the changes in lobbying due to digital transformation and, in particular, social media. Only through the combination of both perspectives by the use of interdependent data from political and lobby sides were holistic results achieved. The study found evidence for a
power shift in terms of influence and demonstrates that transparency and identity are crucial for successful digital communication. The researcher demonstrates that GTM is key to generalising the data since it discovered first insights on the concept of digital lobbying.

5.4.1 Contribution to Research

This thesis contributes to several aspects of research. The major contribution made addresses lobbying research in times of digital transformation. Little is known about how digital communication is undertaken by classic lobbying actors and more importantly what its consequences are, especially in terms of communication processes and its function. Thereby, the thesis especially contributes to a changing research field. The thesis at hand develops a new concept for “digital lobbying” by exploring existing pathways, strategies, and tools predominantly used in political communication that can be characterized as lobbying at the beginning of a new decade of strategic communication. Contributing to the new field of digital lobbying the study focuses on the specific context of Germany. In lobbying literature on profit actors, the investigation of social media as a tool to convince policymakers, is rarely analysed.

Another major contribution is made in terms of methodology in communication studies. Through GTM the research brought fundamental indicators of digital lobbying, offering new insights into digital communication processes and public involvement. The final process model reveals knowledge of digital and analogue communication directions, which extends research in the field. Furthermore, the thesis is an example of a cross-disciplinary approach mainly complementing to strategic communication research at the intersection of political communication research. Located at the interface between political and strategic communication the approach not only bridges two disciplines, it also deals with lobbying from two perspectives: the lobbyist- and the political perspective, which contributes to a holistic strategic understanding of the different angles. Research that includes more than one type of actor is rather unusual, as are studies that include both communicating sides. This study brings two perspectives together. By using ethnography, in particular, the researcher was able to add current qualitative observations from fieldwork to the research, which are especially valuable in terms of strategic communication.
Further knowledge of long-term strategic planning is also contributed for organizations, as will be explained in terms of practical insights in the next section.

5.4.2 Contribution to the Lobbying Profession

This research shows that digital transformation does have an effect on the profession of lobbying. For organizations that lobby, in particular, this thesis has discovered long-term changes that will affect each institution in terms of digital communication channels and transparency. The elaborated dimensions show the importance of digital mindsets in terms of influence in a digital world. Even though most classic actors do not yet use digital means, more actors are developing and younger actors use more social media, which will dominate the profession in the coming years. Therefore, the researcher argues that classic lobbying actors must empower themselves to use digital tools and strategies to maintain perceived influence.

Even though currently classic and digital lobbyists can work in parallel, it is probable that in the long term a competitive situation might occur, which is why a digital toolkit will become necessary. Thus, the researcher hopes to initiate a research discourse that looks beyond present practices to further develop the profession of lobbying.

Concerning data issues, it is of the utmost importance to include digital lobbying in lobby registers across the EU.
6 Further Research

With this thesis, the researcher hopes to encourage other researchers to test whether the findings hold true, especially in the European context. Future research should consider whether digital lobbying varies across different institutions and political systems but also investigate the relationship between digital lobbyists. By further studying digital lobbying networks, research will further uncover consequences of the digital setting in classic working processes. A continuation of digital lobbying research, in other countries and using different cases, will lead to the creation of a full theory on digital lobbying, especially as the new context automatically confers a novel purpose on lobbying in times of digital transformation.

This study proves that digital transformation changes the political sphere and, thus, lobbying. It is worth taking a further look at opportunities and possibilities, because the key to successful lobbying in a digital age lies in a combination of “classic” and “digital” lobbying tools and strategies. It is therefore essential to better know how first, lobbying actors who work more transparent (as presented in Section 2.3.3) and new actors, like Fridays For Future, use digital lobbying tools in more detail and if there are any similarities. In this context, using the qualitative technique “netnography” (Kozinets, 1998) could give insights into networks, virtual communities, actions, experiences, and online processes to understand interactions in digital communication contexts, especially within the growing political sphere. Thereby, the concept of transparency should also be further analysed as its use in a digital setting bears high potential for future research.

How digital roles further develop will be an important discussion and one which will certainly advance with the current European Communication Monitor 2021, which focuses on further analysing digital transformation and digital infrastructures in communications and future roles in strategic communication.

Another idea that involves digital data sets is to analyse networks and tools through quantitative studies. Social media use needs further investigation to answer questions such as:
• Who has more influence on the public opinion in terms of range?
• Who has more influence on MPs in terms of interaction?

Analysing the followership of and interactions with lobby posts by MPs could give an understanding of how much politicians engage online. Particularly in terms of the “Covid-19 digital transformation boost”, digital developments need to be continuously analysed. Gathering digital data over a longer period of time will reveal developments that will be relevant for further legislative periods but, above all, will provide insights with regard to digital natives. Only then can correlations of activity and influence and public opinion and reaction by MPs be further explored through regression analysis. Another way to answer these questions could be a clustering by activity and influence (k-means clustering). Activity is another keyword that leads to “society” and “participation” in terms of “democratic culture”. The wider horizon of the findings in this study should also be carried over into further research, especially since the idea of “deliberative participation” (Thimm et al., 2014) has been around for quite some time. Digital lobbying could be put in relation to deliberative participation to further understand future developments in terms of political participation and public actors.
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