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# Personalization of tech corporations: Examining personalized news and the media reputation of Google, Facebook, and Apple in Swiss news media

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## Abstract

Tech corporations, such as Google, Facebook, and Apple, have increasingly become the focus of public media attention and are subject to public scrutiny due to their prominence and scandals. Often, the news media reports on the corporations' chief executive officers and founders as representatives of the corporations to make complex company-related information comprehensible and gain more public attention. The personalization trend in the news media has turned some corporate leaders into celebrities and is linked to tech companies' media reputations, that is, the evaluations of tech companies in the news media. However, research on personalization in corporate news is rare and conflicting, and whether and how personalization is linked to the media reputations of Big Tech corporations is not yet clear. By focusing on different personalization types, this study investigates the relationship between personalization and the evaluation of tech companies in the news. A quantitative content analysis of media articles ( $N = 5234$ ) in Swiss news outlets revealed that the news on tech companies is frequently personalized, and personalized news is more negative and more often related to the social aspects of tech corporations than non-personalized news. Our study indicates that personalization is

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used as a journalistic style in the news about tech corporations but is most common in negative reporting in which the role of tech corporations in society is critically assessed.

### Keywords

Personalization, tech corporations, media reputation, chief executive officer communication, news media coverage

## Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium and the global economic crisis in 2008, a small number of tech corporations have received the bulk of the technical, social, and economic attention. These Big Tech corporations, such as Apple, Google (Alphabet), and Facebook (Meta), are decisive in transforming the public sphere and have increasingly become the focus of public attention and are subject to public and media scrutiny (Schwinges et al., 2023). Often, to make complex company-related information comprehensible and gain more public attention, the news media reports on companies' chief executive officers (CEOs) and founders as corporate representatives (Denner et al., 2018). This personalization trend in the news media, that is, the focus of the news on individual personalities, such as the leader of an organization, has turned some corporate leaders into celebrities (Little and Winch, 2021) and is linked to the public perception of the companies (Denner et al., 2018).

Personalization has been widely discussed in political communication research (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Personalization is hypothesized to increase newsworthiness and the audience's attention to a news piece (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011). Although economic news is as vital to society as political news, research linking economic or corporate news and personalization is scarce, with a few exceptions (Denner et al., 2018, 2020; Park and Berger, 2004). Park and Berger (2004) examined ten years of corporate news and found that reputation formation in the news became increasingly personalized; the CEO and personal dimensions of the corporations' exponents were emphasized, displacing corporate issues. In addition, their study implied that the valence of corporate news became more positive over time (Park and Berger, 2004), which would positively affect the companies' media reputation, that is, the overall evaluation of companies in the news (Deephouse, 2000). More recently, research has found that personalization dynamics gain particular importance in times of crisis (Denner et al., 2020), which would negatively affect companies' media reputations due to the harmful nature of crises (cf. Deephouse, 2000). These mixed findings might be related to personalization types (Eisenegger, 2010), which may affect media reputation differently. The current study thus examines whether various personalization types can be identified in the reporting on Google, Facebook, and Apple and how these patterns affect the media reputations of these tech corporations.

To that end, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of articles ( $N = 5234$ ) in Swiss news media from 2015 to 2018. This study contributes to the existing research on

personalization and media reputation by investigating the relationship between the increasing focus on corporate representatives and the evaluation of tech corporations in the news. Media reputation is relevant, as it potentially affects the public perception of tech corporations and the debate about their perceived role in society (cf. [Deephouse, 2000](#); [Marschlich and Vogler, 2023](#)).

## Literature review

For this study, we consider the phenomenon of personalization, understood as the focus on individual personalities (e.g., the leader of an organization; [Van Aelst et al., 2012](#)), in the context of corporations and news. We follow the mediatization approach ([Krotz, 2009](#)) and look at personalization in the reporting on Big Tech companies (Apple, Facebook, and Google) because they are central in today's digital society. The role of their reporting has not yet been sufficiently researched despite the significance of the news media as watchdogs and corporate accountability mechanisms ([Schwinges et al., 2023](#)). [Schwinges et al. \(2023\)](#) found that Big Tech companies have received increasing media coverage recently, and journalism's watchdog role has become more apparent. CEOs are particularly visible in the case of Big Tech companies, which is closely related to the personalization trend in journalistic media ([Denner et al., 2018](#)). This can have positive and negative implications for Big Tech's media reputation ([Deephouse, 2000](#)). Our study aims to investigate the link between personalization and the media reputation of companies by distinguishing between different types of personalization (role-related vs. role-distant and subjective vs. objective) to gain a more granular understanding of and detailed insights into personalization as a journalistic style.

In the following, we introduce the concept of personalization and apply a mediatization perspective to the phenomenon. Subsequently, we discuss the relationship between personalization and a company's media reputation. Finally, we present multiple personalization types and discuss previous research on personalization in corporate news and the particularities of Big Tech corporations.

### *Personalization and organizations*

Personalization is a widely discussed phenomenon in political communication and journalism studies (e.g., [McAllister, 2007](#); [Van Aelst et al., 2012](#)), but few scholars have studied personalization in economic news ([Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011](#); [Denner et al., 2018, 2020](#)). Personalization can be conceived as the process of turning attention to individual personalities to aid the interpretation of complex issues ([Eisenegger and Konieczny-Wössner, 2010](#); [Van Aelst et al., 2012](#)). Personalization occurs at three levels: the medial, the strategic/organizational, and the receptive, and each of these three levels is influenced by the expectation of a focus on personalities at the other levels ([Eisenegger and Konieczny-Wössner, 2010](#); [Van Aelst et al., 2012](#)). The personalization of organizations or other actors, such as political parties, occurs in the media; i.e., individual persons representing an organization or political party become the focus of media coverage at the expense of the organization or party (e.g., [Plasser and Lengauer, 2008](#)).

Second, personalization is a strategic communication instrument—the organization focuses on a personality as the representative of the organization when communicating about organizational efforts (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011; Denner et al., 2019). Third, personalization occurs at the recipients' level, which is reflected in, for instance, citizens whose voting behavior is more dependent on individual candidates than on a party (e.g., McAllister, 2007). Accordingly, *personalization* can be defined as a phenomenon through which a person becomes the focus of organizational concerns, and it manifests itself in organizational self-presentation, external representation in the media, and the public's perception of the organization (Eisenegger and Konieczny-Wössner, 2010).

### *Mediatization as a driver of personalization and the construction of media reputation*

Since the early 1990s, an increased media focus on individuals has been observed in association with a change in news selection and presentation by journalists (Park and Berger, 2004). Moreover, with the emergence of social media, researchers have observed an even stronger public focus on personalities (Barberá et al., 2017). Hence, we argue that organizations and the media rely on personalization because they assume increased audience attention to personalities. In our study, we apply the mediatization approach, according to which various social systems, including the economic system, adapt to media logic (Krotz, 2009). Following this, our paper argues that personalization in the media is the most critical driver of the personality-centered perceptions of the audience. In this vein, Lengauer and Winder (2012) defined personalization as “a communicational phenomenon and core element of the prevailing media logic and of the mediatization” (p. 14). Concerning corporate news, previous scholarship has outlined that business editors rely on portraying personalities to reduce complexity and make decision-makers and their responsibilities (more) visible (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011). The personalization of corporate news mainly appears in times of crisis or during changes in corporate structures, as the news factor “prominence” is supplemented by the news factor “conflict” or “negativity” (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011).

In line with agenda-setting, by reporting on corporations, the media influences how visible corporations are in the public sphere and with which attributes they are portrayed (Carroll and McCombs, 2003; Jonkman et al., 2020). In this way, news influences the media-mediated reputation of a company, that is, the media reputation (Deephouse, 2000; Marschlich and Vogler, 2023). Media reputation is defined “as the overall evaluation of a firm presented in the media” (Deephouse, 2000: p. 1091). The media reputation of organizations can be located at the functional and social levels (Eisenegger, 2005). The functional dimension of media reputation refers to facts and verifiable aspects, such as competence, economic performance, and profitability, as referred to and evaluated in the media. The social dimension of media reputation is based on moral values and norms and reflects how the media presents an organization's adherence to individual or societal values and norms or its engagement in societal issues (Eisenegger, 2005).

## *Personalization of corporate news and CEOs in the news*

Personalization trends in the news have been studied mainly in the context of political communication. Some political communication studies show a personalization trend in media coverage, that is, the personalization of news is increasing overall (McAllister, 2007), while others conclude that personalization in the media has not increased (e.g., Kriesi, 2012). In contrast to research on political news, studies on the personalization of corporate news are rare, and those that exist were conducted many years ago (e.g., Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011; Park and Berger, 2004).

Prior research has revealed that personalization is becoming more common in economic news (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011; Park and Berger, 2004). As Brettschneider and Vollbracht (2011) showed, personalization is often applied to audiovisual media—first and foremost, television. This is mainly related to the possibility of enhanced visualization through audiovisual media (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011). Regarding the personalization of corporate news, CEOs get the largest share of media attention of all corporate leaders, and news putting CEOs at the center of their reporting has increased over time (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011; Park and Berger, 2004). Therefore, public relations (PR) managers are increasingly concerned with creating a positive reputation for CEOs and getting media attention for their CEO “stories” (Zerfass et al., 2016). However, strategic communication by and about CEOs comes with opportunities and risks (Denner et al., 2018, 2020). While a likable and charismatic CEO, such as Apple’s previous CEO, Steve Jobs, can support a company’s reputation, CEOs can easily be used as scapegoats in times of crisis (cf. Denner et al., 2019).

This ambivalence in CEO reporting is evident in previous empirical studies. On the one hand, Park and Berger (2004) found that between 1990 and 2000, U.S. news coverage of CEOs became more positive in tone. In contrast, Brettschneider and Vollbracht (2011) found that CEOs in German news received more frequent attention from the news media, but they (and the associated corporations) were also often portrayed negatively. CEOs usually receive positive coverage only when they take office (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011). Accordingly, the negative reporting is related to the fact that the CEO, as a corporate representative, is blamed for any failures in economic performance. Moreover, journalists tend to use the news factor “negativity” when reporting on CEOs, which is thought to increase public attention (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011).

## *Tech corporations, personalization, and news*

Our study focuses on Google (Alphabet), Facebook (Meta), and Apple, as they are among the most critical Internet corporations worldwide, having considerable market power due to their immense financial revenues in the advertising market (Prado, 2021). In addition, they affect many areas of social life and impact citizens’ well-being (Van Dijck et al., 2019). For this reason, “Big Tech” corporations are constantly prevalent in public debates and portrayed in the media (Little and Winch, 2021; Schwinges et al., 2023). Big Tech corporations influence public opinion-making processes related to their platforms’ roles in generating data, programming

algorithms, and the associated possibilities of influencing information selection and dissemination (Schwinges et al., 2023). These characteristics make them highly newsworthy and increase media scrutiny (Schwinges et al., 2023).

The assumption that corporate representatives, especially CEOs, take on an increasingly significant role in corporate news and PR efforts holds true in the case of Big Tech corporations. Current CEOs like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg or former CEOs like Apple's Steve Jobs have become their company's voice and symbol, practically embodying the company (Little and Winch, 2021). Big Tech corporations and their charismatic and often internationally recognized CEOs are guided by digital solutionism (Nachtwey and Seidl, 2020). Accordingly, it is part of their self-image that digital solutions (i.e., digital products and services) are central economic and social progress drivers. Big Tech companies claim that it is not just about maximizing profits but about making a valuable contribution to improving society (Nachtwey and Seidl, 2020). Another reason for the personalization of Big Tech in the news is the self-promotion of some of the Big Tech CEOs. For instance, the CEOs of Google, Facebook, and Apple use their channels (e.g., personal social media accounts) to disclose and comment on corporate decisions (Little and Winch, 2021). At the same time, the CEOs of Big Tech companies have tremendous power to make decisions within the company because they own a high number of company shares (Stewart, 2018). For instance, as of March 2023, Zuckerberg is the biggest shareholder of Facebook; he approves all major company decisions (Arrieche, 2023). Hence, CEOs play a significant role in determining the course of companies and increasing the newsworthiness of information related to them (cf. Little and Winch, 2021). According to Little and Winch (2021), the celebrityization (Driessen, 2013) of Facebook and similar Big Tech companies is unique compared to the celebrityization of other companies. The tech giants can use their channels and information infrastructures to present themselves, eliminating many of the gatekeeping roles of external organizations (Little and Winch, 2021). In this way, Big Tech corporations can potentially control how they are presented to the public.

Recently, the studied Big Tech companies and their representatives have been exposed to increased media attention, which can be explained by the newsworthiness based upon the power and influence of the tech corporations and their CEOs (cf. Little and Winch, 2021). However, this increased attention comes with reputational risks (Weiss-Blatt, 2021), as indicated by a series of recent scandals. For example, Facebook was subjected to massive scandalization in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which led to a hearing in front of the U.S. Senate and new regulatory processes (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). Google, too, has weathered repeated scandals. For instance, the company has been accused of avoiding tax payments (Reuters, 2019) and not displaying certain minorities and political positions appropriately in search engine results (Young and Hagan, 2021). Such scandalization regularly exposes the CEOs of tech companies to extensive media publicity (cf. Denner et al., 2020). However, despite scandals, Facebook, Google, and similar tech corporations also seem to be subject to a personalization trend (Weiss-Blatt, 2021). To explore whether news about the Big Tech companies Google, Apple, and Facebook is personalized and how it may differ across issues, we state the following research question.

RQ 1: What role does personalization play in reporting on Big Tech corporations overall and across issues?

### *Personalization and media reputation*

The increasing emphasis of business news on individual personalities in a company, mainly CEOs, implies that impersonal portrayals of companies are being replaced by highly personalized communication (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011; Park and Berger, 2004). An increase in personality-focused communication can affect the constitution of media reputation, which might be narrowed down to evaluating the company leader(s). Brettschneider and Vollbracht (2011) showed that the share of CEOs in news coverage increased, and so did negativity. As Sohn et al. (2009) found, critical CEO reporting negatively impacts corporate reputation, while the effect of positive CEO reporting is negligible. An explanation is that negative information in the news is often more appealing and attracts more attention from the audience than positive information (cf. Jonkman et al., 2020). Denner et al.'s (2018) study explored frames in the news about CEOs. The study suggests that coverage of CEOs could benefit the corporate reputation, depending on the frame used in the news. In another study, Denner et al. (2019) emphasized that CEO communication can represent both an opportunity for and a risk to a company's reputation. Hence, we assume that whether personalized corporate news positively or negatively affects a company's media reputation may depend on issues or personalization types. Social issues such as philanthropy, lifestyle, and community engagement were found to be among the most frequent issues where personalization occurred in corporate news (Park and Berger, 2004). Other issues, including corporate performance, strategy, and salary, were covered less frequently in CEO-centric reporting (Park and Berger, 2004). Thus, it is assumed that personalized news is likely to fall into the social dimension of media reputation.

Furthermore, personalization can appear in different forms. First, following Eisenegger (2010), we can distinguish between *object* and *subject* personalization. Subject personalization occurs when a corporate representative, such as a CEO, becomes the spokesperson in a media story. This is the case, for example, when CEOs are quoted directly (cf. Carroll and McCombs, 2003). Object personalization occurs when the company is talked about (i.e., the company becomes the object and does not set the media agenda). In addition, Eisenegger (2010) distinguished between two personalization types, depending on the role covered in the news: *corporate role-related* or *corporate role-distant* personalization. Role-related personalization refers to a person's performance, competence, or leadership. In the role-distant dimension, expressive personal traits (such as integrity and charisma) or the person's private life are emphasized (Eisenegger, 2010).

Eisenegger and Konieczny-Wössner (2010) investigated whether and how specific personalization patterns in the news relate to companies' media reputations. The results showed that the companies' representatives were most frequently discussed in their corporate roles. The effects of corporate role-related personalization on media reputation were slightly positive during the study period. The study also indicated that corporate role-related personalization of functional aspects (e.g., company performance) had fewer



negative peaks. These results suggest that media reputation is less volatile and less negative for role-related personalization patterns focusing on functional aspects than on social or personal aspects (Eisenegger and Konieczny-Wössner, 2010). Park and Berger (2004) found that CEO news coverage primarily focuses on competency (equivalent to role-related personalization) and the personal characteristics of the CEO (similar to role-distant personalization). As different issues and types of personalization may have different impacts on the media reputation constitution, we pose the following research questions.

RQ 2: To what extent can personalization types be identified in news about Big Tech corporations?

RQ 3: How are personalized news, in general and across issues, and personalization types in the news of Big Tech corporations related to media reputation?

## Methods

### *Procedure and sample*

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of media articles portraying Google, Facebook, and Apple in Swiss news media. Switzerland is a highly suitable country for studying tech companies because, outside of the US, Google's largest corporate headquarters are in Zurich. Facebook and Apple similarly have subsidiaries and offices in Switzerland. In addition, Facebook adopted Geneva as the headquarters for its digital currency, Libra. Past events connected to tech companies, including several internationally discussed scandals, the companies' influence on citizens' daily lives, and the physical presence of Facebook, Google, and Apple in Switzerland make it likely that the companies will generate high media resonance in Swiss media.

The data included news articles focusing on Google, Facebook, or Apple between June 2015 and September 2018.<sup>1</sup> In that period, the CEOs of Google were Larry Page (until October 2015), one of the founders of Google, and Sundar Pichai (who began in October 2015 and still holds the position today). For Facebook, the CEO was and remains Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook (now Meta), and the CEO of Apple was and remains Tim Cook. The media sample contained the most relevant Swiss newspapers (in terms of largest circulation and nationwide focus) in the two largest language regions (German and French), comprising subscription press (*NZZ*, *Tages-Anzeiger*, *Le Temps*), tabloid press (*20 Minuten*, *Blick*, *Le Matin*), Sunday newspapers (*Le Matin Dimanche*, *NZZ am Sonntag*, *Sonntagsblick*, *Sonntagszeitung*, *Tages-Anzeiger Sonntag*), and business press (*Finanz und Wirtschaft*, *Handelszeitung*). Swiss media outlets were continuously and systematically studied in the project to monitor national and international organizations and their media reputations. To identify relevant media articles for this study, articles that reported on Google, Facebook, or Apple were selected. The company's name had to be mentioned at least once in the article's title, subtitle, or main text. A total of 5234 articles that covered news regarding Facebook ( $N = 1735$ ), Apple ( $N = 1851$ ), or Google ( $N = 1648$ ) were identified and manually coded by trained coders.

## Coding procedure

In addition to formal categories (date, media outlet, and title), the following content categories were coded: personalization, communication mode, personalization type, issue, evaluation of the reputation object, and evaluation dimension. The latter two categories measured the media reputation of the companies included in the study.

“*Personalization*” was coded as no personalization, corporate role-related personalization (i.e., a person representing the company was portrayed related to their corporate function), or personalization distant from the corporate role, i.e., a company representative was described in their private role. The category “*communication mode*” assessed the extent to which the reputation object dominated the reporting as a source of information (i.e., whether it took an active role). An active communication mode was coded when a corporate representative was cited directly or indirectly. A passive communication mode was coded when the company or corporate representative was merely the object of the news article. Next, the articles coded as personalized were reassessed against another variable called “*personalization type*” to explore whether subject or object personalization applied. Personalized news articles with an active communication mode represented “subject personalization,” and those with a passive communication mode fell into the category of “object personalization.”

To investigate whether specific “*issues*” related to tech corporations were more personalized in the news and how those were related to media reputation, the following issues were coded: economic performance, strategy, management, human resources, products and services, research and expertise, communication, corporate social responsibility and business ethics, regulation, and other. Finally, media reputation was assessed based on two categories: *evaluation of the reputation object* (ranging from  $-2$  “negative explicit” to  $2$  “positive explicit”) and the *evaluation dimension of the reputation object* (Eisenegger, 2010). For the latter, we coded whether the reputation object (the company) was evaluated on a functional level (i.e., how successfully or competently a company fulfills its purpose) or on a social level (i.e., the news article relates corporate behavior to social norms and values or refers to a company’s integrity or credibility).

A team of trained coders conducted the content analysis of the newspaper articles, and the intercoder reliability for each variable was calculated. The study relied on Cohen’s kappa coefficient, which is considered a standard technique in content analysis for analyzing the proportional reduction of error (cf. Wimmer and Dominick, 2000). The reliability of each variable was medium to high, ranging from 0.72 to 0.94<sup>2</sup> with an average coefficient of 0.81. According to Banerjee et al. (1999), Cohen’s kappa coefficients of 0.75 or higher indicate excellent agreement, 0.40 to 0.75 fair to good, and a value below 0.40 poor agreement. The kappa values for the variables in this study indicate excellent or good agreement and imply good-to-high intercoder reliability.

## Results

### *Personalization of news about tech corporations and personalization types*

Concerning RQ1, *the role personalization plays in news coverage of the Big Tech corporations Google, Facebook, and Apple*, the analysis shows that a large majority

(91.9%,  $N = 4810$ ) of the articles about Google, Facebook, and Apple did not refer to a personality. Personalization was present in 8.1% of the explored news coverage ( $N = 424$ ). In addition, we examined how personalization in the news differed by issue. The results show that personalization was most prevalent in news about regulation (23% of all personalized articles fall into this topic category,  $N = 97$ ), management and HR (21%,  $N = 81$ ), and corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business ethics (18%,  $N = 76$ ), followed by strategy (15%,  $N = 64$ ) and products and services (11%,  $N = 47$ ).

Moreover, we compared the results for each corporation. For Apple, the results reveal that 5.6% ( $N = 103$ ) of the news coverage on the company was personalized, while a large majority ( $N = 1748$ ; 94.4%) was not. Regarding Google, 95.4% of the articles ( $N = 1572$ ) did not focus on a personality, while 4.6% ( $N = 76$ ) were personalized. For Facebook, the analysis shows that a significantly larger proportion of the coverage was personalized (14.1% in total,  $N = 245$ ). Of the articles about Facebook, 85.9% ( $N = 1490$ ) did not focus on personalities connected to the company. The results of the ANOVA revealed significant differences between the personalization of the three companies ( $F(2, 5231) = 65.26, p < .001$ ). Post-hoc Bonferroni tests indicate that Apple and Facebook, as well as Google and Facebook, differed significantly ( $p < .001$ ). Facebook was significantly more personalized than Google or Apple; however, Google and Apple were not significantly different ( $p = .89$ ).

Concerning RQ2, which asks *to what extent personalization types can be identified*, the results show that across all Big Tech companies, more than half of the personalized news articles ( $N = 247$ ; 58.3%) were identified as subject personalization (the corporate representative actively speaks or is quoted). Object personalization was found in 177 articles (41.7%). Most personalized news focused on the corporate representative in their corporate role ( $N = 398$ , 93.9%), and only a small number of articles referred to the private life of the corporate representative ( $N = 26$ ; 6.1%).

A comparison of the personalization types revealed similarities among the companies. For all three, the frequency of subject personalization (Apple:  $N = 54$ , 52.4%; Facebook:  $N = 146$ , 59.6%; Google:  $N = 47$ , 61.8%) was higher than that of object personalization (Apple:  $N = 49$ , 47.6%; Facebook:  $N = 99$ , 40.4%; Google:  $N = 29$ , 38.2%). However, the results of the ANOVA with subject/object personalization as the dependent variable and the companies as the factor did not indicate significant differences among the personalization types of the three companies ( $F(421, 2) = 1.01, p = .366$ ).

### *Personalization and media reputation*

To answer the third research question, *how personalized news, in general, and across issues, and personalization types in the news of tech corporations are related to media reputation*, we first ran an ANOVA with “evaluation of reputation object” and “reputation dimension” as dependent variables. For the independent variable, a new personalization variable was created (0 = “no personalization”; 1 = “personalization”). For the latter, corporate-role related and corporate-role distant personalization were merged due to the low number of cases for the variable “corporate-role distant personalization.” The results reveal significant differences between personalized and non-personalized articles

regarding evaluating the reputation object ( $F(1,5232) = 10.16, p = .001$ ). The group with the personalized articles had an average evaluation of the reputation object of  $-.69$  ( $SD = 1.13$ ), while the non-personalized articles had an average evaluation of  $-0.50$  ( $SD = 1.21$ ). Hence, personalized news articles about the examined platforms were evaluated significantly more negatively than non-personalized news articles. However, the results also show that irrespective of the degree of personalization, articles about tech corporations tended to be negative in their valence, and personalization further intensified this negative effect.

The ANOVA with the reputation dimension (1 = functional; 2 = social) shows that the mean value for non-personalized news articles is significantly lower ( $M = 1.28, SD = 0.45$ ) than that of personalized articles ( $M = 1.46, SD = 0.50; F(1,5232) = 60.46, p < .001$ ), implying that non-personalized and personalized news differ in the reputation dimension that is most related to them. In the personalized news ( $N = 424$ ), 53.8% ( $N = 228$ ) of the articles fall into the functional reputation dimension and 46.2% ( $N = 196$ ) into the social reputation dimension. In the non-personalized news ( $N = 4810$ ), 71.7% ( $N = 3448$ ) reflect the functional reputation dimension and 28.3% ( $N = 1362$ ) the social reputation dimension. This result implies that personalized news is more likely to reflect social media reputation than non-personalized news. However, the results also show that the media articles about tech platforms, regardless of personalization, predominantly covered information and evaluations that fall into the functional reputation dimension (70.2%,  $N = 3676$ ; social reputation dimension: 29.8%,  $N = 1558$ ).

Due to the low share of subject personalization across news coverage of the three companies, we did not analyze the relationships of subject and object personalization with media reputation.

In addition, we ran separate regression analyses for each issue to assess the extent to which personalization within each issue predicts media reputation. The analyses show that personalization does not significantly predict the evaluation of the reputation object for the issues “economic performance” ( $\beta = 0.04, F(1,535) = 0.79, p = .37$ ), “strategy” ( $\beta = 0.04, F(1,763) = 1.26, p = .26$ ), “management & HR” ( $\beta = 0.00, F(1,169) = 0.00, p = .99$ ), “products & services” ( $\beta = 0.14, F(1,2129) = 3.59, p = .058$ ), “research & expertise” ( $\beta = 0.14, F(1,29) = 3.07, p = .09$ ), and “communication” ( $\beta = .14, F(1,51) = 0.66, p = .80$ ). In contrast, for news about “CSR & business ethics” and “regulation,” significant effects ( $p < .01$ ) were revealed. As such, concerning the CSR and business ethics news of Big Tech companies, personalization was found to significantly predict the evaluation of the reputation object (i.e., the tech corporation) in a positive way ( $\beta = 0.14, F(1,543) = 11.24, p < .001$ ). Personalization explained a significant proportion of the variance in the evaluation of the company in CSR and business ethics news ( $R^2 = 0.18$ ). Comparing the means shows that personalized CSR and business ethics news ( $M = -1.10, SD = 1.01$ ) and non-personalized CSR and business ethics news ( $M = -1.42, SD = 0.73$ ) are negative in their media reputation. Still, personalized news has a significantly more positive evaluation than non-personalized news. Moreover, the results show that all personalized Big Tech news about CSR and business ethics falls into the social reputation dimension ( $N = 77$ ). Hence, personalization in CSR and business ethics news on Big Tech corporations slightly improves the tech corporations’ media reputation in the social dimension.

However, the media reputation in the analyzed timeframe was negative in personalized and non-personalized news.

For regulation news on Big Tech corporations, the linear regression analysis indicates a positive relationship between personalization and the media evaluation of the company ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $F(1,959) = 4.10$ ,  $p = .043$ ). The results show that non-personalized regulation news about Big Tech corporations is more negative ( $M = -1.48$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) than personalized regulation news ( $M = -1.32$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ). Like CSR and business ethics news, personalized regulation news on tech corporations almost always falls into the social reputation dimension ( $N_{social} = 96$ ,  $N_{functional} = 1$ ). Hence, personalization in regulation news about tech corporations leads to a less negative media reputation in the social dimension than non-personalized news on that topic.

Finally, we examined the relationship between media reputation and personalization type (subject vs. object personalization). We ran an ANOVA with the variables “evaluation of reputation object” and “reputation dimension” as the dependent variables and personalization type (subject or object personalization) as the factor (only considering personalized news;  $N = 423$ ). The results show that the mean values of the evaluation of the reputation object differ significantly between the subject personalization and object personalization groups ( $F(1,422) = 3.76$ ;  $p = .05$ ). The comparison of the mean values shows that subject personalization ( $M = -0.60$ ;  $SD = 1.09$ ) had a slightly higher (more positive) evaluation of the reputation object than object personalization ( $M = -0.82$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ). This result implies that articles with subject personalization, that is, when the tech corporations are personalized and a corporate representative is cited, offered a chance to speak, or similar, are covered less negatively than articles with object personalization, where the corporation is only talked about. However, both mean values are negative, implying that object personalization leads to an even more negative evaluation of the company and, thus, to a more negative (media) reputation than subject personalization. For the reputation dimension, we did not find significant mean differences between the two personalization types ( $F(1,422) = 0.68$ ;  $p = .41$ ). This means that subject personalization ( $M = 1.45$ ;  $SD = 0.50$ ) and object personalization ( $M = 1.49$ ;  $SD = 0.50$ ) did not significantly differ regarding their reputation dimension (social and functional media reputation).

## Discussion

This study explored personalization in the news and its link to the media reputation of tech companies. We investigated 1) whether personalization occurs in the news about tech corporations, 2) whether personalization types (i.e., subject and object personalization, corporate role-close and corporate role-distant personalization) apply to the news of tech corporations, and 3) whether and how these personalization types are related to the media reputation of three major tech corporations (Apple, Facebook, and Google).

Overall, we found that personalization occurred in 10% of the Swiss media coverage of the examined tech companies. Due to the lack of comparable data regarding corporate news, it is difficult to assess whether this is a high or low share. However, previous studies

have suggested that personalization in the news is increasing (e.g., [Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011](#)). [Brettschneider and Vollbracht \(2011\)](#) found that around one-fifth of German corporate news stories about the largest corporations in Germany were personalized, a greater share than is illustrated by our results. [Schwinges et al. \(2023\)](#) found that Big Tech companies are more visible in U.S. news than in German news outlets, which makes sense because the U.S. is the country of origin of many Big Tech companies, including Google, Apple, and Facebook. Moreover, their study indicated differences in how German and U.S. news outlets cover Big Tech companies, which their respective media systems might explain. Hence, the personalization of news about Big Tech corporations, and corporations in general, may depend on the media system, which affects journalistic roles and the use of journalistic styles. Future research should adopt longitudinal study designs to investigate personalization in tech corporations' news, possibly considering the news in other countries, particularly the country of origin.

The personalization of corporate reporting is related to the personalization of corporate communications and the personalization of audience perceptions; that is, the focus of the audience is on persons rather than organizations ([Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011](#)). This means that media coverage uses personalization as a journalistic style because companies have increasingly adopted it in their communications (e.g., media releases) or because media outlets adapt to the perceptions of recipients, who are more likely to pay attention to a company when it is associated with a person. In our study, we cannot determine the reasons for personalization because we did not investigate PR materials or survey recipients or journalists. For Facebook, Google, and Apple, it is plausible that the companies themselves focus their communication on the CEOs or that the CEOs address users through their channels. However, their PR efforts and decision-making might explain the CEOs' power to set topics ([Little and Winch, 2021](#)). For example, Facebook (Meta) CEO Zuckerberg owns the largest share of company stock and is involved in every decision-making process ([Stewart, 2018](#)). In this case, the media's focus on Zuckerberg can be considered a logical consequence of reporting on the company rather than a conscious decision by a journalist to focus on one person and personalize the organization.

As our study reveals, the personalization of tech corporations varies according to the reported issue. Management and HR or regulation, as well as CSR and business ethics, are most personalized in the media. This result partly confirms previous research showing that CEOs mainly appear in the media when appointed or when they leave the company ([Park and Berger, 2004](#)), which falls into management and HR. The high degree of personalization in regulation news has not been highlighted in this way, but this result could be related to our study subjects; regulation related to, for instance, data protection is an often-discussed topic for tech companies. Another interesting result is the comparatively high degree of personalization in the media coverage of CSR and business ethics issues, which is primarily negative in tone. Previous studies have demonstrated that CSR is frequently discussed in the news media but tends to be portrayed negatively (cf. [Marschlich and Vogler, 2023](#)). However, our results imply that personalization helps to decrease the negativity associated with CSR news about Big Tech companies.

Moreover, our results reveal that the share of personalized news differed among the companies. We found that Facebook was significantly more personalized than Google and Apple. One explanation might be that Facebook was heavily involved in regulatory discourses because of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and personalized attributions of responsibility often accompany such regulatory discourses. Another explanation could be related to Facebook's corporate communication. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg often shares company-related information and frequently speaks directly to the users (cf. Hoffmann et al., 2018). Although this paper assumes that personalization affects reputation, there might also be a reverse effect; reputation might influence whether a company is personalized in the media.

Regarding the relationship between personalized news and the media reputation of tech corporations, our study revealed that personalized news (irrespective of the issue) is, compared to non-personalized news, more negative in tone and more likely to fall into the social reputation dimension. Thus, our study indicates that personalization in news media coverage may threaten the media reputation of tech companies, particularly in the social dimension of media reputation (i.e., when news refers to social norms and values when discussing the company and its efforts). One explanation for the result that personalized news is more associated with negativity is that personalization is used as a journalistic tool, especially in times of crisis (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011). Crisis reporting and reporting during scandals usually accompany critical and negative reporting on companies. From our data, we cannot explain whether personalization increased in times of crisis, but Facebook and Google were repeatedly subject to scandals in the news in the studied period. More research is necessary to explore personalization in the news during crises or other (negative) events.

Moreover, scholars have already found a negativity bias in corporate news, which harms organizations' reputations (Jonkman et al., 2020). We confirm and extend this research by shedding light on the role of personalization in corporate news, suggesting that personalization and negativity in corporate news seem to be related. The relationship between personalization and negativity can be explained by the news factor "negativity," which is complemented by the news factor "prominence" (Galtung and Ruge, 1965) when shifting attention to personalities, leading to personalized news' even higher newsworthiness (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011). Regarding the negativity and critical scrutiny in the news about companies in general (Jonkman et al., 2020) and Big Tech (Schwinges et al., 2023), scholars have suggested journalists' watchdog role as another explanation. According to Schwinges et al. (2023), journalists are highly critical of Big Tech to highlight these companies' accountability.

Our results further reveal that subject personalization comes with a more positive media reputation than object personalization. This means that when the news reports about a Big Tech leader and that leader is given an opportunity to speak, for example, when they are cited in the article (subject personalization), the tone is more favorable than in news articles in which the Big Tech leader appears but is only talked about (object personalization). Following Bas and Grabe (2013), subjective perspectives give recipients more insight into the speaker's feelings and thoughts. Therefore, it can be assumed that subject personalization is more likely to evoke emotions than object personalization.

However, future research is needed to investigate the conditions that lead to subject personalization and positively influence media reputation, such as the PR efforts of tech corporations.

Our study contributes to research and theory at the intersection of personalization in media and organizations. We provide empirical evidence on personalization types in corporate reporting, offering a more granular view of personalization as a journalistic style and its relationship to the media reputation of Big Tech companies. Due to the significant role of news in shaping perceptions of Big Tech (Schwinges et al., 2023), which aligns with the agenda-setting approach, media reputation is a critical concept for organizations to consider (Deephouse, 2000). In this way, our research contributes to research on corporate visibility in the news and its link to corporate reputation (e.g., Jonkman et al., 2020). Since personalization in the news is assumed to increase in the future due to the increasing focus of recipients on personalities, our study, with its distinct perspective on personalization (role-related vs role-distant and subjective vs objective), is of great value for future research.

Our study has limitations that are mainly associated with the methodological approach. Our study considered only the coverage in news media. In the context of digitalized media publics, personalization seems to become even more relevant for the constitution of reputation. This is related to the changes in media use: Among the most relevant reasons for using social media are individual self-representation, identification, and networking between individuals (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). Therefore, in digitized media ecosystems, a dynamic understanding of the constitution of media reputation, reputation assessment, and reputational arenas is pivotal, highlighting the need for more research on the role of personalization of corporate-related communication and news on social media. Further, our methodology does not clarify whether personalization drives negativity in corporate news or vice versa. In other words, it could also be the case that the more journalists report negatively, the more they refer to personalities like CEOs in their articles.

Moreover, our study only examined media coverage in Switzerland. Personalization as a journalistic means is likely used differently in other countries and media systems. Future research could examine the personalization trends and media evaluations of companies in different country contexts and compare them with our results. Furthermore, the study period of three years was too short to observe changes in personalization trends. Previous research has shown increased personalization in media coverage (e.g., Park and Berger, 2004), but existing longitudinal studies are mostly outdated. Therefore, we suggest conducting longitudinal studies on the development of personalization in corporate reporting using more recent data sets.

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## Notes

1. This study is part of a larger project that studied news coverage about economics and businesses in Swiss media outlets in that period.
2. The intercoder agreements on each variable were as follows, presented per main category. Communication mode:  $\kappa = .74$ ; topic:  $\kappa = 0.86$ ; personalization:  $\kappa = 0.81$ ; evaluation of the reputation object:  $\kappa = 0.72$ ; evaluation dimension of the reputation object:  $\kappa = 0.94$ .

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