



# Professorship Transformational Media: Content as a Driver of Change

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# About us

The Professorship Transformational Media explores how organizations, brands, and policymakers can drive positive societal and ecological transformations through the strategic use of content and media. The interplay between media's impact, increasing consumption, and ongoing digital technology advancements endows media with the capacity for transformational potential. In essence, "transformational" signifies the power to bring about substantial and positive shifts, often encapsulating the most challenging changes that represent a fundamental change in culture, practices, and underlying assumptions (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 2008; Pettigrew, 1987). Hence, transformational media is defined as media that creates lasting positive change. Developing knowledge about transformational media and understanding the power of media in positively influencing behavior and society is valuable for all stakeholders involved in media, marketing, and communication, including students, governments, policymakers, brands, communication specialists, and marketers. For instance, content and media can be used to promote sustainable behavior, communicate a brand's purpose, or provide insights into the societal value and functioning of technological innovations. Our research agenda centers on two primary areas: transformational content strategy and transformational content design. In transformational content strategy, we focus on how consumer insights, organizational perspectives, societal trends, and sustainability goals can be blended into meaningful content propositions. Our research aims to develop innovative tools for crafting content strategies that benefit audiences, organizations, and society. In transformational content design, we investigate the creation of impactful content for media to drive positive behavioral change. Our research delves into the design of meaningful content, its performance, and the synergy between content and media in conveying effective narratives.

## Summarized, our mission is:

*We want to ignite inspiration and propel transformation within individuals, organizations, and society, guiding them towards a sustainable future. We help people, organizations, and society move toward a sustainable future by supporting them in developing and implementing effective transformational content and media strategies. We achieve this through conducting rigorous applied research together with education and practice. We translate this into actionable advice and meaningful collaborations with our ultimate goal to make a positive impact on the world.*

## Reading Guide

In the upcoming section, we will first elucidate the research rationale of the professorship. Subsequently, we will provide an exploration of the research agenda, focusing on the two core research themes of the professorship: transformational content strategy and transformational content design. Within this section, we will identify knowledge gaps and present examples of research projects related to each theme. Finally, we shed light on our research approach, offering a brief overview of the theoretical approach, research methodology, and expected impact.

# Towards a better understanding of transformational media

## The need for change

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 has brought global attention to the impending scarcity of essential resources and its associated problems. These include climate change, biodiversity depletion, deforestation, soil erosion, water scarcity, pollution, antibiotic resistance, diet-related illnesses, and disparities among individuals, societies, and nations. This highlights the urgent need for more sustainable behavior such as pro-ecological, frugal, altruistic, and just actions (Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2013). Sustainable behavior extends to a profound sense of responsibility that drives deliberate actions with the goal of securing the well-being of all living beings, including both current and future generations (Andić et al., 2014). Despite the abundance of reports and sources emphasizing the pressing need to address social and ecological considerations, the transition toward more sustainable behavior has been slow to materialize. The most recent IPCC report in 2023 sounds a stark warning: if we persist with the current status quo, global warming will surge past the critical threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius within the next six years (IPCC, 2023). Troublingly, our consumption patterns are identified as a significant contributor, responsible for as much as 60 to 80% of this impending crisis. And even though a recent study from the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics revealed that three-quarters of adult citizens express concern about the climate (CBS, 2021), this heightened awareness has yet to be translated into widespread and impactful changes in behavior.

## A new economic perspective

To ensure continued prosperity on a habitable planet, it is imperative that we address all forms of material and energy wastage and encourage sustainable practices among both organizations and citizens. Consequently, alternative paradigms for our economic system have been put forth, including the concepts of a post-growth economy, de-growth, and the doughnut economy. Within the Netherlands' the concept of shared prosperity is adopted and

at the heart of current national and local policies. The transition from a narrow prosperity, that only focusses on economic aspects, towards a shared prosperity underscores the importance of achieving equilibrium among economic, social, and ecological interests, recognizing that true well-being requires a harmonious interplay of these dimensions. This new economic perspective demands a swift transformation from both organizations and individuals. Organizations need to assume responsibility and pivot toward sustainable operations, while citizens must adopt more sustainable and healthier behaviors.

## A new organizational perspective

Considering the societal challenges and shifting economic perspective, organizations and brands increasingly focus on their 'purpose' and pursue a higher goal than just making profit (Deloitte Insights, 2021). In line with this development, corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained prominence, emphasizing the need to balance economic, ecological, and social considerations. This approach holds value as organizations aiming for long-term success often incorporate societal objectives into their core strategies, recognizing the significant importance consumers place on businesses adopting social and sustainable practices (Malnight et al., 2020). As a result, the emphasis on shared values frequently leads consumers to prioritize brands aligned with their beliefs (Voorn et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2014). This is corroborated by a global survey across 25 countries, revealing that personal values strongly influence brand preference, with an average of 70% of respondents favoring brands in accordance with their principles (Ipsos, 2021). Additionally, an organization's commitment to sustainable and social practices is essential in attracting and retaining Gen Z employees (Cubist Martini, 2021). The shift toward shared prosperity also necessitates a reevaluation of the marketing concept, emphasizing demarketing. Traditionally, marketing focuses on creating demand for products or services. However, already in 1971, the concept of demarketing was introduced by Kotler & Levy

(1971) and applied as a response strategy to the energy crises in 1973 or to suppress demand to signal scarcity with the aim to grow demand. Today, demarketing involves brands promoting their own products with environmentally conscious motives to reduce overall consumption within a specific category (Armstrong Soule & Reich, 2015). However, for organizations and brands it has become increasingly complex to communicate about their CSR activities. This complexity is exacerbated by the prevalence of content saturation, the dissemination of fake news, and instances of greenwashing—where sustainability claims do not align with actual organizational behavior (Szabo & Webster, 2020). Additionally, NGO's, governments and policymakers seek strategies to positively influence the behavior of citizens that are essential to realize the transition towards a sustainable society. Although substantial systemic changes including regulatory measures and redistribution of resources are essential to address the complex issues such as climate change, individual interventions can inform these system measures (Chater & Loewenstein, 2023) as well as affect individual behavior through altering individuals' perceptions, motivations, knowledge, and norms (Steg & Vlek, 2009).

## The dynamic media landscape

The substantial influence of content and media in our lives is exemplified by the increase in daily media consumption to 495 minutes in 2021, driven by factors such as digitalization, mobile phone usage, and the pandemic (ZenithOptimedia, 2021). The content we consume is not only developed by traditional publishers, but increasingly also by policymakers, governments, businesses, and non-profit organizations (Harms et al., 2022). Yet, due to the ever-expanding complexity of the media landscape, marked by factors like digital transformation, the dominance of social media, misinformation, and media fragmentation, creating effective content and media strategies that drive positive change has become a challenging endeavor. In addition, technological developments have brought about significant shifts in consumer media behavior. With the ubiquitous presence of personal media devices and reliable internet connections, consumers now can access and consume media content instantly, irrespective of their location or the time of day (Grewal and Stephen, 2019). Furthermore, the contemporary media landscape is characterized by an abundance of communication opportunities, a transformation driven by the Internet and social media. The emergence of new social media and streaming platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Netflix has significantly expanded the array of immersive media available to the audience. These changes

have affected the production, distribution, and consumption of information and led to a media ecosystem where consumers can seamlessly engage with diverse content across various platforms (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). This has also led to a highly fragmented media landscape in which the rise of new competing digital and social networks poses challenges in audience engagement.

## Content as a driver of behavioral change

Content and media play a pivotal role for organizations, brands, and policymakers in achieving their goals. They act as catalysts for change, development, and influencing behavior (Vigar et al., 2011). Here, "content" encompasses a wide array of online and offline materials/messages, including images, videos, sounds, texts, and experiences, designed to influence and engage audiences. Meanwhile, "media" focuses on the method of delivering these impactful messages to stakeholders. This involves choosing the medium (e.g., the internet), platform or application, and the device (e.g., mobile phones) utilized to convey the message effectively (Harms et al., 2017). Media content influences how people perceive and interpret messages, impacting our cognitive and





social experiences significantly (McLuhan, 1964). As a result, both content and media can be a great tool for learning (Vigar et al., 2011), for instance, by helping people understand and adopt new technologies. Media can exert its impact on both individual and societal levels, shaping elements such as cognition, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors (Potter, 2012). At the individual level, media can influence people by providing information and raising awareness about sustainable or healthy behaviors, as well as the consequences of negative behaviors, which in turn may lead individuals to change their behavior. For instance, content creators dedicated to sustainable living and zero-waste lifestyles, like "zero waste home" and "plant-based living," inspire individuals to reduce their waste and live more sustainably. At the societal level, this effect is seen more collectively, as media help to create a shared awareness of a norm, encouraging social coordination as people are more likely to embrace it when they see others following suit (Potter, 2012; Ajzen, 2002). For example, the #MeToo movement gained momentum through social media and mainstream news. It created a collective awareness about issues related to sexual harassment and assault, leading to a societal shift in how such behavior is perceived and

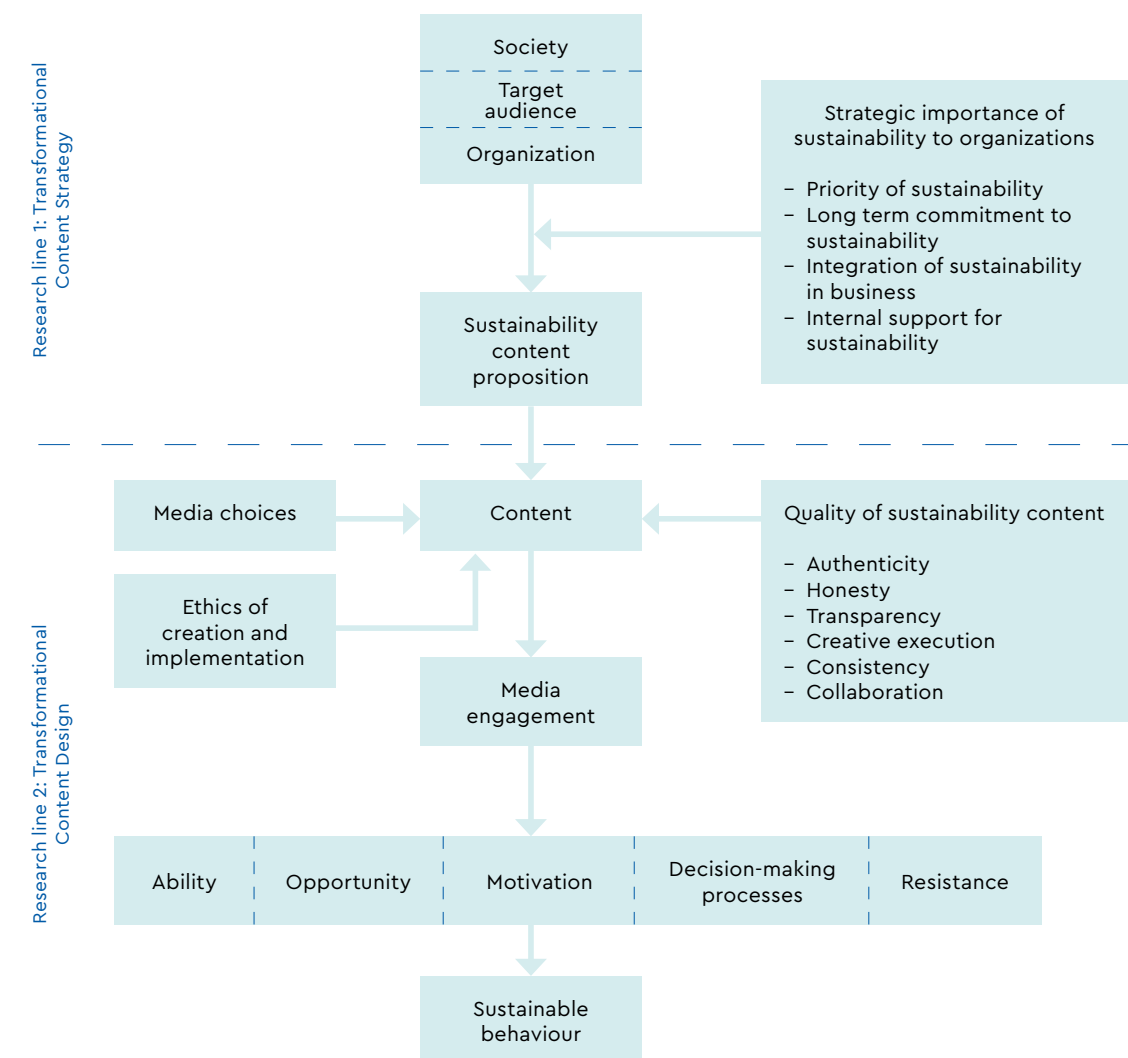
addressed. Another example is the documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" by Al Gore that raised global awareness about climate change. It led to increased public concern and calls for action, ultimately contributing to international climate agreements like the Paris Agreement. Given its reach and potential to establish emotional connections, media can significantly influence social norms (Arias, 2019).

### Need for knowledge on how to create transformational content and media

In our rapidly changing society and evolving media landscape, there is a growing demand for expertise in utilizing content and media effectively and ethically to influence citizen behavior. In practice, this goal is frequently not achieved for various reasons, including a lack of comprehension of the target audience, the context, or an unclear message. Consequently, there is a pressing need for knowledge on how to transparently and efficiently employ content and media to communicate the sustainability narrative. This need applies to communication from both private organizations looking to convey their sustainability practices and public organizations striving to influence citizens' behavior, each with different implementations and consequences.

# Research Agenda

**Figure 1: Research Agenda Professorship Transformational Media**



### Research Line 1: Transformational Content Strategy

Since consumers and employees are increasingly expecting organizations to make a societal contribution and take a stance on societal issues (White et al., 2019; Kumar, 2018), there is a noticeable shift from developing, distributing, and promoting content to achieve commercial objectives towards objectives with societal and sustainable impact. This shift has presented new challenges for organizations in effectively and strategically communicating their sustainability objectives and actions.

The design and implementation of effective content and media are founded on strategic design principles, which evolve through the synthesis of insights from society, potential audiences (target groups), and the organization's strategy. This underscores the importance of conducting comprehensive research into pertinent societal developments, audience behavior, and the organization's strategy. Such research is an indispensable component in developing a transformational content strategy that forms the bedrock for designing content and selecting the appropriate media.





### Knowledge gaps

The shift towards shared prosperity has presented two knowledge gaps for organizations in effectively and strategically communicating their sustainability objectives and actions. It is well-established in the fields of marketing, management, and communication sciences that organizations need to communicate and act from a strategic perspective (e.g., Keller & Swaminathan, 2019; Kotler et al., 2019). The first gap lies in the lack of understanding concerning the strategic insights from the organization's broader environment (including *society, organization, and target audience*) into meaningful *content propositions*. More specifically, there is a need to learn how to determine which insights are relevant, how these can be effectively extracted and translated. There is a knowledge gap in terms of how these strategic insights can be gathered, synthesized, and translated into design principles for effective content strategies.

The second gap lies in reconciling the seemingly conflicting goals of marketing and sustainability in the eyes of consumers. Traditional marketing encourages consumption, while sustainability advocates for circular resource flows (White et al., 2019). Thoughtless or misguided use of content that addresses societal or sustainability topics by commercial organizations or brand can lead to negative perceptions, such as skepticism and mistrust towards the brand or organization, and potentially leading to negative financial consequences (Szabo & Webster, 2020). Many organizations are afraid of being accused of purpose washing and are therefore not communicating at all about their social and/or sustainable ambitions and activities (greenhushing) (Harms & Leeftang, 2023). Although the significance of formulating the purpose is emphasized in literature and practice (Leonidou et al., 2017), practical guidance on how organizations can achieve this is scarce. The Sustainable Communication Model developed by Harms and Leeftang (2023) proposes strategic and communication prerequisites for effective sustainability. The strategic prerequisites concern the *strategic importance of sustainability* to the organization, while the communication prerequisites pertain to the *quality of sustainability content* in Figure 1. Understanding how to effectively operationalize these prerequisites in various contexts is essential, as it forms the cornerstone for the development of transformational content design.

### Research projects

Research that addresses the first gap seeks to shed light on how organizations and brands can translate strategic insights from society, organization and target audience into meaningful content strategies which serve as a foundation for effective and informed content and media decisions. It endeavors to accumulate knowledge and produce professional products that assist organizations in transforming their strategic insights into a genuine and sustainable content proposition.

#### Example project

##### Content propositions with purpose

How can brands effectively convert their customer, organizational, and societal insights into meaningful content propositions for all stakeholders? The professorship has developed a framework to assist organizations in synthesizing these insights by employing a design research approach. This framework is continuously tested and refined through collaboration with students from the master's program in Content & Media Strategy as they work collectively to address this pivotal question.

Research that is related to the second gap considers the lack of knowledge on how sustainable and/or societal story can be communicated effectively. It includes research that explores how practitioners can be supported in their process of developing effective and meaningful content strategies that meet the strategic prerequisites of the Sustainable Communication Model (strategic importance to sustainability of organization in Figure 1

#### Example project

##### Sustainable storytelling design

During the implementation of sustainability policies, consumers frequently assume a pivotal role, prompting many companies to seek ways to involve their customers in this process. This necessitates understanding of design and behavioral principles. In response, the professorship partners with the digital design agency Greenberry to create workshops. These workshops empower communication and marketing professionals to adeptly create authentic and meaningful sustainable brand narratives that correspond with their organization's strategy and resonate with consumer values.

### Research Line 2: Transformational Content Design

Within this research line, the professorship focuses on investigating the use of content and media to bring about positive behavioral change. This includes research focusing on consumption behavior (e.g., how can content help consumers make more sustainable choices), employee behavior (e.g., how can content encourage an inclusive environment), or social behavior (e.g., how can content help people care for one another). The transition towards shared prosperity demands radical change in all types of behavior. Achieving shared prosperity necessitates a profound transformation in all forms of behavior of which many sustainable behaviors are perceived as requiring effort, time, or being difficult to execute, creating barriers to their adoption (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000). In addition, the swiftly evolving media landscape and the growing fragmentation of media consumption require an urgent demand for knowledge and professional tools to navigate these intricacies.

### Knowledge gaps

Within this research theme, three knowledge gaps are identified. The first gap pertains to the development of *high-quality sustainability content* while adhering to the prerequisites for effective sustainability communication (Harms & Leeftang, 2023). Effective content design and media choice are inherently context-dependent, and a one-size-fits-all strategy for behavior change doesn't exist. Each unique context demands a profound understanding of the target audiences to craft effective formats and messages, and to select the most suitable channels for dissemination. Comprehensive audience insights are necessary to develop effective content for behavioral change because the reasons why people do not exhibit desired behaviors are extensive. In the context of sustainability, there is often an attitude-behavior gap, where positive attitudes towards sustainable behavior do not necessarily lead to actual sustainable actions (Sniehotta et al., 2005). This poses a significant challenge for policymakers, nonprofit organizations, and marketers (White et al., 2019; Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Understanding the attitude-behavior gap is complex, as it involves the interplay of many factors. Various theoretical models exist that try to comprehend sustainable purchasing behavior, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) or the Behavioural Change Wheel (Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011). In general, behavior occurs when individuals have the necessary *capability, opportunity, and motivation* (Michie, et al., 2011). Capability relates to knowledge and skills, opportunity involves external factors, and motivation stems from individual

processes (Michie et al., 2011). Also, factors related to the *decision-making processes* are important to consider. For instance, certain sustainable behaviors are perceived as effortful and time-consuming, creating barriers to their adoption (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000). People may also experience *resistance* to persuasive attempts or specific behaviors, leading to defensive reactions like avoidance and denial (Van 't Riet and Ruiter, 2013), or motivated reasoning, a cognitive bias aligned with existing beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Naturally, the most effective media choice depends on the target audience's media consumption patterns. It is crucial to comprehend how all these factors may impact the desired behavior and how this understanding can be leveraged to craft messages and content that effectively connects with the target audience, ultimately driving behavioral change.

The second research gap is the need to explore the specific dynamics and impact of these strategies in shaping the effectiveness of complete narratives across various platforms. Media concepts often involve cross-media (content distributed across different channels), transmedia (different media complementing each other's content), or multimedia (utilizing multiple media forms to convey a unified





message) strategies (Moloney, 2019). Additionally, User-Generated-Content (UGC) can be a valuable component of content and media strategies, contributing to a stronger online presence, higher engagement, and increased trust in the brand (e.g., Müller & Christandl, 2009). This gap underscores not only the effectiveness of individual content pieces in driving change but also the effectiveness of *media choices* in shaping the entire narrative when utilized across various platforms.

The third gap delves into the *ethical dimensions of content and media*, covering concerns related to personal data collection and utilization, privacy safeguards, consent procedures, and the principles of personalization, accessibility, and inclusivity. Given the decline in consumer trust in brands, as observed in reports like Havas' 12th Meaningful Brand Report (2021), it is imperative to consider ethical marketing practices to rebuild and enhance consumer trust (Kumar et al., 2023). This gap gains relevance with the growing integration of emerging technologies, such as AI and VR, in the realm of transformational content design.

#### Research projects

Research addressing the initial gap provides insights into effective message types for specific purposes and audiences. Many factors influence the effectiveness of content. For instance, message type selection depends on the path individuals take to action: Intuitive thinking prompts immediate responses to persuasive messages, often triggering emotional reactions. In contrast, the analytical process engages when there's time and mental capacity for critical thinking. Messages backed by logical information are effective in complex or uncertain situations (Kahneman, 2013). Emotional messages suit routine decisions, while detailed, analytical content is necessary for long-term change (White et al., 2019; Kahneman, 2013). Also, framing behavioral options as gain or loss has a significant impact. Gain messages emphasize benefits or prevented disadvantages from following recommended behavior, while loss messages highlight benefits not obtained or disadvantages when not following the behavior (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981; Rothman et al., 2006). In this context, it's crucial to understand how audience insights are translated into compelling messages that lead to transformational content design. Equally important is the establishment of reliable methods for assessing and measuring the resulting impact.

#### Example project

##### The effects of countercampaigns

The Dutch government considers conducting countercampaigns and prescribe disclaimers for advertisements that promote unsustainable products. However, the effectiveness of these measures is unclear. Under the supervision of prof. dr. Bolderdijk (University of Amsterdam) and prof. UAS dr. Harms, Researcher, PhD-candidate Joris Galama studies to what extent countercampaigns are effective in making consumers more resistant to persuasive advertisements that drive unsustainable consumption behavior.

Content strategies encompass the process of designing and distributing diverse types of content, including user-generated material, through various media channels. Content creators are presented with a dynamic media landscape offering both opportunities and challenges. To effectively engage audiences across a multitude of platforms, creators must continually adapt their strategies to align with the shifting patterns of media consumption (Marketerhire, 2022). The research associated with the second gap delves into the exploration of how narratives and stories can be effectively communicated through a synergy of multiple platforms.

#### Example project

##### How to stop vaping among teens

The insight "Influence the influencer" was discovered through a qualitative study conducted by students from the master's program in Content & Media Strategy, in collaboration with the professorship, the physician collective #artsenslaanalarm, and the creative agency WeFilm. It led to the development of a successful anti-vape video campaign launched on TikTok. The campaign garnered substantial engagement from the target audience and received extensive media coverage on virtually every news platform, both offline and online, in the Netherlands. Moreover, the students responsible for the winning concept were nominated for the LC Awards and were honored with the GGD Smoke-Free Award.

Research addressing the third gap explores what constitutes ethical behavior in the context of content and media practices. This entails an examination of the ethical competencies required by current and future content and media professionals, aiming to inform both education and practice regarding the concept of ethical and responsible conduct.

#### Example project

##### Content marketing ethics

This project aims to define the concept of content marketing ethics and provide a thorough overview of key ethical themes within the context of content marketing. This research starts with a systematic literature review to identify and summarize the current knowledge and themes from research in the fields of marketing and media ethics. Subsequently, a qualitative study is carried out among industry practitioners. The insights will also be translated into a workshop for students and practitioners.

Hoge Noorden / Jacob van Essen





# Our approach

## Theoretical approach

Our aims to contribute to the development of content and media that facilitate significant societal transitions. Knowledge is available from various disciplines such as consumer psychology, marketing, communication, sociology, and political sciences, all focusing on behavior change at environmental, community, interpersonal, or individual levels (Avis, 2016). We do not adopt a dominant theoretical framework but instead selects from a plethora of theories, as each framework and theory can provide

insights and assist in contemplating potential action perspectives to promote and influence behavioral change. Therefore, we embrace an "open theory" approach where a range of disciplines can clarify, explain, and drive behavioral change. This multidisciplinary approach is unique. Through applied research, we can play a significant role in synthesizing, testing, and building upon scientific knowledge from various domains in different contexts.

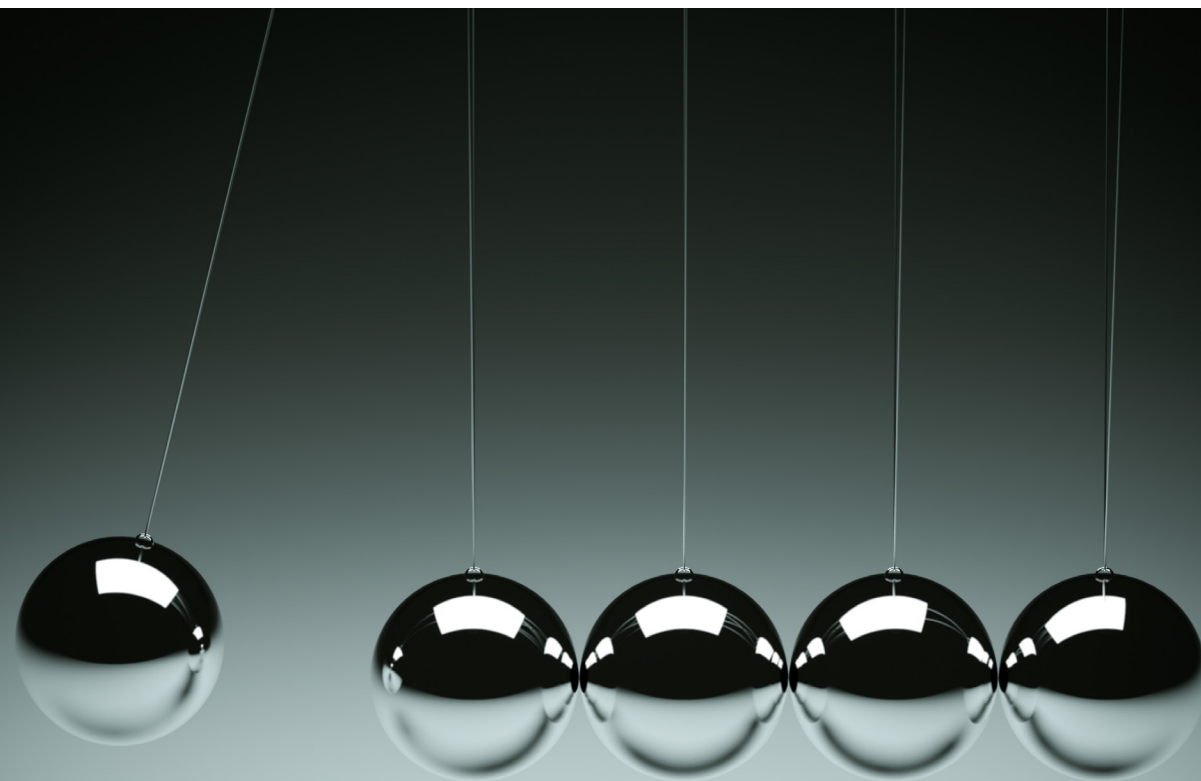
## Methodological approach

Our research is both descriptive and explanatory. The research methodologies we employ depend on the issues and the context. Whereas different quantitative and qualitative methodologies are used for diagnosis, design-based research is suitable for many issues related to the design of transformational content.

## Dissemination & Impact

We aim to have an impact at various levels. By impact in the context of applied research within higher education, we mean "the influence of both the research process and the research results on education, practice, and society" (Pijlman et al., 2017). We strive to enhance knowledge and innovation in education and practice with the aim to make a positive societal impact.

The primary goal of our research is to address specific practical challenges and devise actionable solutions for real-world implementation. Research outcomes must align with the demands and complexities of practical fields, providing valuable insights. Our ambition extends beyond diagnosis and advice; it encompasses the creation of professional products and solutions tailored for practitioners. The impact of the professorship extends to education as well. By engaging students in collaborative applied research, the program equips them with the skills to effect positive societal change, fostering their development as future change agents. For lecturers, the professorship provides valuable insights during meetings and training, aiding their professional growth. It also promotes research skill development among teachers. With researchers actively involved in teaching, we integrate projects into curricula to enhance both student and teacher competence in applied research within the transformational media domain. Furthermore, we aim to support the advancement of lecturers through PhD, Professional Doctorate, and Postdoc programs while enlisting lecturers for project-based research group participation.



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