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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Blenninger, L., Christoph, P., Herrmann, C., Johe, P. A., Rummeni, F., & Willer, S. (2022). Under pressure: An analysis of the perceived positioning pressure on socio-political issues and its influence on the external communication of German companies. In A. Godulla, L. Beck, E. Christiansen, P. A. Johe, T. Krüper, V. Niemsch, F. Saxinger (Eds.), *Disrupt Adapt: New ways to deal with current challenges in media and communication* (pp. 15-42). Leipzig <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-81816-2>

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Imprint

Disrupt Adapt: New Ways to Deal with Current Challenges in Media and Communication

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First Edition, Leipzig 2022



Under Pressure

An Analysis of the Perceived Positioning Pressure on Socio-Political Issues and its Influence on the External Communication of German Companies

Lina Blenninger, Paula Christoph, Chantal Herrmann,
Pauline Anna Johe, Friederike Rummeni, Sarah Willer

Abstract

Today, more and more companies tend to position themselves with public statements on socio-political issues such as racism or discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community represented through popular movements like Black Lives Matter or the Pride Month. According to surveys, most consumers expect companies to take a stand on such polarizing topics. Despite this apparent relevance in society, there is only little research on companies taking public stances, yet. Moreover, the existing studies addressing the topic predominantly focus on the influence of corporate positioning on customer attitudes and only a few studies examine the impact of companies speaking out on socio-political issues, their communication and decision-making processes, and their attitudes. In order to close this research gap, 19 semi-structured interviews with communicators of internationally operating German B2C companies were conducted. As the results show, the interviewed companies are all perceiving societal pressure, but up to different degrees. Equally different is the associated impact of positioning on external communications and strategic planning. In general, three initial patterns can be identified on how companies deal with positioning pressure: The *skeptics*, who do none or almost no positioning, the *adapters*, who speak out on specific issues and closely observe the current debates, and the *pioneers*, who feel less pressure and are the first companies to speak out and even initiate debates themselves. It remains to be seen if these patterns will be established in future research and if uniform strategies in corporate communications will develop when it comes to the topic of socio-political positioning.

Keywords

Socio-Political Issues, Social Pressure, Corporate Positioning, Corporate Social Advocacy, External Communication

Introduction

LGBTQIA+, Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 vaccination – when talking about topics like these, society today is more polarized and differentiated than ever before. Companies, too, more and more take part in debates related to such topics – and that is not without reason. According to a recent study by the University of Münster, the contemporary German society is shaped by a fundamental conflict based on different concepts of identity (Back et al., 2021). The study showcases that in Germany, as in other European countries, there are two opposing societal groupings characterized by seemingly irreconcilable social positions and corresponding solidified opinions (Back et al., 2021, p. 5). Looking at the figures, almost 34% of German citizens feel that they belong to one of these two divergent groupings, as Back et al. (2021, p. 12) point out. It is therefore not surprising that, as societal demands and their articulation become increasingly present, companies are expected to take a stance on virulent social issues. Due to meta trends like globalization and mediatization which influence today's society, companies become more and more visible and are therefore increasingly inclined to speak out on topics heavily discussed in societal debates. This becomes particularly clear when comparing surveys: While in 2018, around one in three German citizens expected companies to take a stance on socio-political issues, by 2020 the proportion had doubled to 66% (Theobald, 2018; Inhoffen, 2020).

Although the topicality of corporate positioning is clear from a social perspective, science has so far only dealt with it superficially (Hoffmann et al., 2020, p. 157). Studies primarily pursue quantitative approaches and focus on different fields, for example the influence of corporate positioning on customer opinions and attitudes or consumers' purchase intentions (cf. Hong & Li, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). However, hardly any attention is paid to the way in which the ever-increasing expectations of a polarized society influence companies, especially regarding the company's decision to take a stance on socio-political issues. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on the influence of the perceived positioning pressure regarding socio-political issues on the external corporate communication of international B2C companies.

For this, 19 semi-structured guided interviews with communicators from internationally operating German B2C companies were conducted followed by a qualitative content analysis. The experts gave insights into the internal processes taking place when companies are facing socio-political issues. The study focuses on the general perception of positioning pressure, the considered criteria when taking a stance, and the internal planning procedure of corporate positionings.

Literature Review

Companies are currently influenced more than ever by the three meta trends of globalization, mediatization, and polarization, especially with regard to the acquisition of (social) legitimacy. This results in the phenomena of corporate social responsibility and, if we go a step further, corporate social advocacy. The topics which are parts of these phenomena need to be monitored, for which issues management becomes relevant. In the following sections, these theoretical concepts are defined and their coherence is presented.

Societal Meta Trends: Globalization, Mediatization, and Polarization

To better understand the concept of corporate positioning on socio-political issues, it is important to understand the three meta trends globalization, mediatization, and polarization, as they influence companies in their daily business. They play an important role in gaining legitimacy since they affect the social environment in which corporations are operating today (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3). Globalization can be described as the increase in “economic, social and political interdependencies around the world” (Verčič et al., 2015, p. 785). Globalization leads to a weakening of national-state regulation, which also means that there are fewer standards of action from governments. Companies are therefore increasingly engaging in self-regulation to fill the void created by globalization (Cragg, 2005, p.15). In addition, the growing transparency of corporate activities worldwide due to the increase in media coverage means that companies’ undertakings are being examined more thoroughly, resulting in changed legitimacy commitments (Dryzek, 1999, p. 48). This leads to the second trend, mediatization, which can be described as the process in which media are getting integrated more deeply into all levels of society (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014, p. 4; Strömbäck, 2008, p. 241). A kind of interdependent relationship between media and institutions of society emerges, as corporations have to follow the logic of the media to reach their relevant stakeholders (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 113). On the other hand, mediatization ensures that the reporting on companies increases and with that their visibility, while the coverage focuses particularly on sensationalism or conflicts (Altheide, 2004, p. 294).

Through processes of mediatization, companies need to cope with a media sphere that is dominated by political divisions on socio-political issues to get to address their relevant audiences, which takes us to the third meta trend, polarization: This describes the simultaneous existence of opposing viewpoints (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008, p. 566). The opinion or ideology becomes the focus of the identity of citizens (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3).

Companies, in turn, are also influenced by the polarized society, as they are part of it and can no longer sit back due to their increased visibility caused by mediatization (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3).

Gaining and Maintaining Legitimacy: The Concept of the Social License to Operate

As pointed out before, meta trends are heavily influencing companies in their daily business, which is why it is important to consider the relationship between companies and society as well as the necessary attribution of legitimacy by a company's stakeholders. Only then one can better understand corporate positioning on socio-political issues. Through the fabrication of products and/or services and in their role as employers, companies have a direct influence on individuals and society as a whole, and thus represent an actor with agency (Thummes, 2020, p. 2). To secure this agency in the long term, it is necessary to constantly maintain and renew the social acceptance, and thus to generate a social "permission" for the enterprise and its actions. Precisely, this social permission for a company's activity encompasses the concept of the social license to operate (SLO) which "is defined as the ongoing acceptance or approval for a development granted by the local community and other stakeholders" (Hall & Jeanneret, 2015, p. 214).

With the aim of obtaining the SLO companies must, in addition to fulfilling legal and governmental obligations, meet the moral expectations of their environment and society as a whole (Gunningham et al., 2004, p. 307). Moreover, the volatile nature of the SLO is particularly important to understand the construct: The social acceptability attributed to the company by its stakeholders can be revoked at any time by a change in the perception of the company (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3). Hence, a loss of the SLO can have serious negative consequences for companies (Hurst et al., 2020, p. 3).

Referring to the meta trends of globalization, mediatization, and polarization mentioned above, companies in current times are gradually more in the focus of media coverage and are further operating in an environment characterized by a multitude of socio-political issues. These developments put companies under increasing pressure to take a stance on societal issues, in order to secure their SLO on an ongoing basis (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 1). In sum, it can be stated that for companies in the context of mediatization, polarization, and globalization not only the preservation of their SLO is relevant, but also its continuous renewal (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 4).

Corporate Social Responsibility as a Basis

An important factor in maintaining legitimacy is corporate social responsibility (CSR). The work “The Responsibility of the Businessmen” by Howard R. Bowen from 1953 is usually cited as the scientific basis for CSR, since Bowen is considered one of the first to have dealt with possible responsibilities on the part of companies (Bowen, 1953). The public demand for it gains momentum especially from the 1970s onwards. Moreover, it cumulates in the 1980s/90s with the increasing globalization and its challenges as well as the establishment of the stakeholder theory by Freeman (Freeman, 1984; Jarolimek, 2014, p. 1270; Schultz, 2011, p. 30). According to Freeman, the focus of corporate goals should not be exclusively on the financial interests of shareholders. All persons who are influenced by the company, and therefore stakeholders, must be considered (Freeman, 1984).

The connection between Freeman’s stakeholder theory and CSR becomes particularly clear in the definition of the Commission of the European Union from 2011: “A concept that serves as a basis for companies to integrate, on a voluntary basis, social concerns and environmental issues into their corporate activities and interactions with stakeholders” (European Commission, 2011, p. 8).

This definition emphasizes that companies should not only act economically and legally correct but also adhere to moral standards in order to obtain the legitimacy of their stakeholders, while still operating in a voluntary way. When considering the aspect of voluntariness, the question arises as to why companies pursue CSR activities and communicate them. According to empirical studies, in addition to increasing legitimacy and achieving a competitive advantage (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010, p. 15), stakeholder pressure coming from employees, customers, and investors also plays an important role (Helmig et al., 2016; Mohr et al., 2001).

When corporate social responsibility is considered in the context of how companies can maintain and renew legitimacy from their stakeholders, it becomes clear that this can happen in relation to social and environmental concerns. However, looking at today’s corporate world, one can see that this can also be done through positioning on socio-political issues (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 8), bringing the concept of corporate social advocacy into focus.

Corporate Social Advocacy

The concept of corporate social advocacy (CSA) was first defined by Dodd and Supa (2014). Their definition of CSA goes beyond the traditional understanding of CSR, as it refers to the conscious public positioning by a

company on socio-political issues that lie outside the scope of interest of traditional CSR communication (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288; Gaither et al., 2018, p. 179; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 6). CSA and CSR therefore primarily differ in terms of the topics communicated. In the area of CSA, these are not directly related to the company or its core business. Instead, they can be found in the socio-political spectrum and have the potential to outrage stakeholder groups (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5).

Furthermore, CSA is seen as a communication measure, which can be accompanied by corporate activities, but can also stand on its own (Gaither et al., 2018, p. 179). CSA clearly belongs to public relations, as the company's socio-political positions are disseminated by the PR department via various communication channels (Dodd & Supa, 2014). However, the question of the motives for positioning cannot be answered clearly in the studies available to date. Nevertheless, CSA can help build legitimacy, reputation, and trust while maintaining and continually renewing corporations' SLOs (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 8). CSA can also be seen as a help for companies to navigate in today's globalized, mediatized, and polarized world (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 6). In order to be able to withstand this (in)direct positioning pressure exerted on companies, van der Meer and Jonkman (2021, pp. 7-8) propose to orient oneself to the company's internal values and own moral standpoints. This is one way to maintain the SLO while preserving the integrity of the company. On the one hand, these values should provide companies with guidance in assessing the relevance of socio-political issues. On the other hand, they help them decide which of these issues to take a stand on.

The field of CSA is still relatively under-researched, especially compared to the body of studies that can be found in the CSR field. Among the few studies dealing with CSA, the majority focuses on the influence on customer attitudes. Dodd and Supa (2015) asked participants about their (dis)agreement with the legalization of same-sex marriage and the influence of a company's positioning about this issue on consumer buying behavior. The study revealed that high consumer agreement with an organization's CSA measures triggers high purchase intentions and vice versa. Hydock et al. (2019) found that consumers are more likely (less likely) to choose a brand that participates in CSA, if its position is (dis)aligned with their own. Moreover, CSA is more likely to increase the loss of customers than to excite and attract a new consumer through positioning (Hydock et al., 2019). Overton et al. (2020) examined the influence of CSA on consumers, using Nike's Racial Equality campaign as an example. The results suggest that Nike's CSA initiative has a positive effect on purchase intentions, among other factors. CSA can also increase stakeholders' willingness to support the organization in a positive

way (Browning et al., 2020). When looking at the body of studies, it is also apparent that the focus lies mainly on U.S. respondents and organizations. Song and Lan (2022) are the first to examine the effects of CSA on consumers in the Chinese market.

Issues and Issues Management

Against the backdrop of the consequences of companies' work environments and the necessity of constantly securing their legitimacy and SLO, it is essential for corporations to identify socially relevant topics at an early stage in order to address them in their corporate positioning. More accurately: the integration of these topics into their corporate communications is vital to permanently ensure their survival (Mast, 2020, p. 90). This anticipatory and proactive approach to corporate communications describes the concept of issues management. It helps companies to identify potential threats related to social, economic or political contentious issues in their environment and anticipate the chances of success of positioning themselves on such issues (Wiedemann & Ries, 2014, p. 494).

These strategy-critical topics, known as issues, that companies are trying to determine cannot be uniformly defined, but are generally understood to include topics of public interest and transcendent concerns between companies and their environment or stakeholders (Röttger & Preuße, 2008, p. 164). Therefore, issues have an impact on acceptance, legitimacy, and thus the exercise of entrepreneurial action in their very nature which makes them particularly significant for companies (Röttger & Preuße, 2008, p. 164). Further, issues can be described as topics that allow opposing views and thus have a conflictual substance that potentially harbors risks but also opportunities for companies (Mast, 2020, p. 92).

In order to identify and anticipate issues at an early stage, companies follow a recurring systematic process, named issues management process, originally introduced by Howard Chase (1977) which can be represented in "a six-step process chain" (Lütgens, 2015, p. 780). The first step is the *search and identification of issues* where companies observe and evaluate their environment in order to determine issues, or even signs of such, which might be relevant for them (Lütgens, 2015, p. 782). In doing so, companies use a variety of methods which can be roughly assigned to three groups: issue scanning, describing a less targeted and more exploratory study of the company's environment, issue monitoring, referring to a targeted observation and investigation of the issue topics, and forecasting methods, with the purpose of predicting trends and future developments that have the potential to form issues (Lütgens, 2015, p. 782).

In the second step of the issues management process, *the prioritization of identified issues*, companies then rank the determined issues according to their relevance to identify the top ones. The assessment and prioritization of the identified issues varies between companies, but in practice, two central characteristics of issues form the main evaluation criteria: impact and urgency of issues (Lütgens, 2015, p. 784).

In the third step of the process, the results of step two are used to *analyze the prioritized issues* in relation to the most important criteria to establish a precise understanding of their substance and significance (Lütgens, 2015, p. 784). The prioritized issues are analyzed in terms of their content and associated effects, the parties and groups involved and the relationships among these, as well as their development over time and signs of future development. In addition to the three units of analysis mentioned, the relationship of the company to an issue also plays a decisive role, especially in view of the respective strengths and weaknesses with regard to the issue (Lütgens, 2015, p. 785).

The fourth step in the process describes the *strategic decision on how to deal with the most relevant issues*. In theory, there are ideally five different strategic response options available: By deliberately disregarding an issue, a company acts *reactively*, an independent anticipation of the issue by a company is equivalent to an *adaptive* strategic response option, according to Lütgens (2015, p. 786). In a *proactive* approach to an issue, a company strives to actively shape the issue in its own sense by actively influencing it, while an *initiative* response option represents a company's effort to derive its own benefit from it and to anticipate it accordingly. Finally, an *interactive* approach to an issue represents a company's efforts to deal with it in collaboration with its competitors in such a way that a mutual benefit is created (Lütgens, 2015, p. 786).

In the fifth step of *planning and implementing action and communication programs*, companies finally develop programs for internal company actions which (may) result from an issue, as well as programs for external corporate communication in dealing with the identified issues (Lütgens, 2015, p. 787).

As a final step, the *evaluation of the issues management process* concludes the ideal-typical process by evaluating the results conducted and assessing the effectiveness of the separate process steps (Lütgens, 2015, p. 787).

Research Questions

As described above, societal meta trends have strongly shaped the environment in which companies operate today. Thus, companies not only have to deal with diverging interests and different requirements of their various

stakeholders but are also confronted with increased social visibility (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 1). These new circumstances are accompanied by changed demands regarding the actions of companies and specifically the execution of their business (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 3). In order to ensure entrepreneurial success and the survival of companies in general, they are dependent on securing the acceptance of their actions and thus their legitimacy on the part of their stakeholders in the sense of a societal “permission” for their actions (SLO) (Hall & Jeanneret, 2015, p. 214).

This process of adaptation can only be successful when companies recognize and anticipate societal needs and demands. Consequently, companies are confronted with increasing pressure not only to comply with legal norms and to deal with corporate social issues (CSR), but also to address and take a stand on socio-political issues in their communications that are not directly related to the company (CSA) (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5). This development represents the guiding research interest of this paper: *What influence does the perceived pressure to take a stand on socio-political issues have on the external corporate communication of internationally operating German B2C companies?*

Specifically, this study aims to address this question based on three derived research questions:

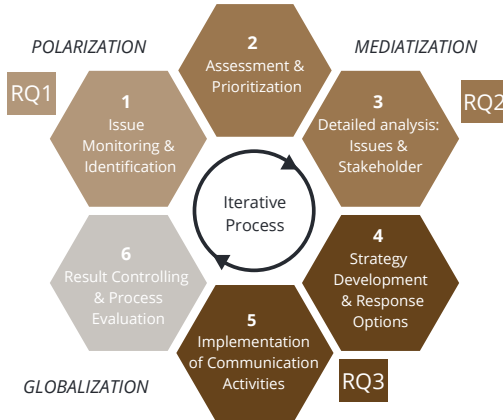
RQ1: *How is the pressure to position oneself on socio-political issues perceived?*

RQ2: *What criteria are used to decide which topics to take a position on?*

RQ3: *How is external positioning on socio-political issues strategically planned?*

In order to answer the research questions presented, this paper uses Lütgens’ (2015) issues management process as a theoretical framework, with the first research question referring to step one of the processes, RQ2 focusing on steps two and three, and RQ3 relating to steps four and five. The final step of the process, the evaluation, has been excluded from this work, as it is not directly related to the research interest. Figure 1 illustrates the connection of the research questions to the steps of the issues management process and how this is embedded in a company’s environment characterized by the meta trends in society outlined above.

Figure 1.
Theoretical framework and research questions.



Own depiction based on Lütgens (2015, p. 781).

Methodology

To answer the research question, 19 communicators from internationally operating German B2C companies were interviewed. This sample was developed using the criterion sampling strategy (Patton, 2002, p. 238) to select particularly information-rich cases strategically and intentionally. The basic population, which includes all German companies, was reduced to a relevant sample by three predefined criteria. The first criterion defines that the analyzed companies must be among the 120 German companies with the highest turnover, according to the listing of the F.A.Z.-Institute (Fehr, 2021, p. 19). It can be assumed that companies with a high turnover serve the demand of many customers, have a high level of awareness, and might then potentially be more exposed to a positioning pressure. In addition, it can be assumed that these high-turnover companies have sufficient resources to establish strategic processes for socio-political positioning which can be described in the interviews. The second criterion specified that the corporations surveyed must operate at least partly in the business-to-consumer sector, as these organizations have a larger public arena and potentially face particularly higher positioning pressure due to their presence in the public (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 21). Finally, the third criterion determined that only companies operating internationally would be considered in the sample, as these face particularly high challenges in positioning themselves in an international context due to globalization and therefore represent an interesting object of research. This approach reduced the data base from 120 companies to 50

companies relevant to the research interest. From each of these selected companies, communicators with managerial authority were requested as interview partners, as they can provide detailed insights into the internal decision-making processes due to their decision-making authority. The final sample of interview partners can be found in table 1:

Table 1.

Final sample of interview partners

| Official Position Title of the Interviewee | Industry Field | Annual Revenue Rounded in Mil. € (2020) |
|--|-----------------------|--|
| Head of Reputation Management and Strategic Communication | Automotive | 50.000 |
| Head of Corporate Communications | Automotive | 155.000 |
| Project Manager Communication Strategy and Reputation | Automotive | 30.000 |
| Director Corporate Communications | Automotive | 225.000 |
| Head of Global Media Relations and Executive Communications | Conglomerate | 60.000 |
| Spokesperson & Head of External Corporate Communications | Conglomerate | 15.000 |
| Senior Vice President Corporate Communications, Corporate Marketing and Public Affairs | Energy Supply | 20.000 |
| Global Head of Corporate Communications | Food | 10.000 |
| Director Public Relations & Affairs | Food | 10.000 |
| Communications Director Continental Europe | Food | 5.000 |
| Head of Strategic Affairs | Media | 20.000 |
| Head of Communications | Mobility | 15.000 |
| Head of Corporate Communications and Media Relations | Pharmacy | 40.000 |
| Senior Vice President Corporate Communications | Pharmacy | 35.000 |
| Head of Digital Communications (groupwide) | Retail | 20.000 |
| Head of Public Relations & Spokesperson | Retail | 5.000 |

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| | | |
|---|-------------------|---------|
| Group Vice President Corporate Communications and Political Affairs | Retail | 15.000 |
| Senior Vice President Brand and Communications | Technology | 10.000 |
| Head of Corporate Sponsorship and Communications Strategy | Telecommunication | 100.000 |

The interviews were conducted using a questionnaire divided into three sections according to the three research questions and the connection to Lütgens' issues management process (2015, pp. 781–787). The first section refers to the perception of a positioning pressure by companies (corresponding to RQ1 and step 1 in the issues management process), the second section refers to the criteria that play a role in a positioning decision (corresponding to RQ2 and steps 2 and 3 in the issues management process), and the third section refers to the strategic implementation of positioning (corresponding to RQ3 and steps 4 and 5 in the issues management process). The validity of the instrument was tested by a scientific expert opinion replacing a pretest. A total of eleven open-ended questions were predefined, further specified by sub-questions and the option of potential follow-up questions adapted to the conversation (Springer et al., 2015, p. 55). The virtual interviews took place between January 7, 2022, and February 3, 2022, using video conferencing platforms and were recorded. The key questions of the guideline were provided to all interviewees before the interviews took place. The interviews were evaluated with Mayring's (2015) qualitative content analysis. Within this, a set of categories and the guideline referring to the derived research questions – all based on Lütgens' issues management process (2015, pp. 781–787) – were created. Four main deductive categories and eight additional preliminary subcategories were implemented. This first version of the category system was tested in an initial coding process, by analyzing all interviews and subsequently deleting unnecessary or adding missing categories inductively (Mayring, 2015, p. 64). In accordance with the exploratory approach of this paper, the categories were thus deductively pre-structured and then inductively extended based on the material (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 169; Mayring, 2015, p. 97). Further, a coding manual was created that contains definitions and anchor examples for the respective categories (Mayring, 2015, p. 49). Initially, this was developed theory-guided and supplemented on the material during the trial coding. In order to increase validity and reliability, a coding guide was defined, whose adherence was mandatory for all participants of the research group during the coding process. With this finalized category system and the coding guide, a second,

and final coding process was conducted. The contents relevant to the research question were then systematically assigned to the category system.

Results

In the light of the societal meta trends of globalization, mediatization, and polarization and based on the theoretical framework of the SLO and the issues management process, the study aims to examine the internal processes taking place in corporations when taking a stance on socio-political issues. The findings are clustered according to the three research questions dealing with the general perception of a positioning pressure, the criteria for decisional processes, and the strategic planning of corporate positioning.

The Perception of a Positioning Pressure

The first research question examines how the pressure to position oneself on socio-political issues is perceived. Almost all interviewees agree that corporate positioning is gaining importance and that there is a clear trend towards more, louder, and bolder corporate statements. It is perceived that companies are speaking out more consciously, especially when it relates to their own customer sector, summarized by one interviewee saying that they are developing “*a voice*”.

When it comes to the question where the pressure to position oneself as a company comes from, the experts name different sources. Internally, the communicators primarily notice expectations from employees and the top management. Much more central, however, seems to be the pressure from societal discourses and the expectations of the general public. These expectations are expressed by younger generations in particular as well as by politicians, and NGOs. Some of the interviewed companies also perceive increasing pressure from customers – this is especially true for companies that are highly active in the consumer goods sector and have many contact points with their customers. Also, journalists put pressure on companies since many believe that corporations must take a stance and expect them to do so. Therefore, the media looks “*more closely at companies and points the finger at them*”, as one interviewee observes. Furthermore, the companies surveyed name competitors and their statements on an issue as a source of pressure. Nevertheless, not all of the interviewed communicators feel such an expectation of positioning coming from external demands. In fact, some say that the positioning decision has to come from an intrinsic motivation and should not be demanded from outside.

In general, most of the interviewees emphasize that the positioning should be aligned to the company’s internal attitude and should be based on its

value system, business model, or employees. Furthermore, not responding at all to inquiries is no longer an option, they say. When it comes to positioning, it is important not to jump on every issue, but to find the right balance. According to the experts, companies should rather focus on a few issues appropriately instead of dealing with many at the same time.

Contrasting statements were made on whether companies – being part of society – have a social responsibility or whether they have no responsibility to deal with social conflicts. Still, some interviews show that there is a shift concerning the responsibility of corporations: *“We have to do more than just [...] manufacture products and sell products. We are in a social context and have to prove ourselves as a corporate citizen there”*. The attitude that positioning is correct and important tends to prevail in the sample.

When it comes to the general attitude toward corporate positioning, the opinions diverge: Some respondents are of the opinion that corporate positioning has no impact, some companies rarely position themselves and instead act more in the background. Others embed clear statements in their corporate culture. Opinions also differ on the extent to which positioning can have a (positive or negative) impact on profitability. Still, companies tend to be cautious to not jeopardize their business by taking a stance on socio-political issues.

In general, most interviewees agree that social media is a driving force in this development and that the USA play a leading role. With the meta trend of mediatization, communication arenas have changed which makes silence on the corporate side more noticeable and dialog orientation increasingly important.

In sum, it can be noted that an increased positioning pressure is perceived. Still, the companies surveyed weight the various sources and stakeholders differently in their decisions.

Corporate Positioning Decisions: Key Criteria

The second research question examines the criteria companies consider deciding which issues to take a stance on. External, internal, and issue-specific factors are considered, with the fundamental criterion being meeting the expectations of various stakeholders.

First, customers and their demands are the most important criterion for corporate positioning, according to the communicators interviewed. Second, observing competing companies and their positioning is central – although the respondents do not agree on whether this results in a positioning of their own company or not: One of the interviewed companies sees its competitors as a benchmark and also takes a position when they do. Some of the

respondents perceive increased pressure from the positioning of others, but this does not necessarily lead them to position themselves as well. Others state that the competition plays no role in their positioning decision. Other factors are general expectations of society and the current relevance of the debate, as well as statements from politicians, the capital market, Investors or shareholders, suppliers and business partners, neighbors, or journalists. In terms of internal factors, the respondents state that the topic must primarily fit with the company's values and activities. Topics are therefore of greater relevance the better they align with the company and its core principles, otherwise there is a risk of authenticity deficits or even reputational damage. Employer branding is also cited as an important criterion for a positioning decision. In fact, such decisions should always be tailored to the employees in order to strengthen the identification with one's company. If this is not the case, positioning will be avoided, according to the respondents.

However, it is not only internal and external factors that influence the positioning decision of the companies surveyed, but also the issue itself. For example, an issue seems to be particularly relevant if it has a temporal urgency, triggered by ad-hoc journalistic inquiries or social virality. On top of that, corporate positionings become more attractive to companies if they have the potential to immediately impact society. As one interviewee points out: “[W]hen I show a positioning, I also want to achieve an impact with it”.

Regardless of the criterion, a particular challenge for internationally active companies remains: the difference in value systems and cultures in which they operate. Not only stakeholder expectations vary according to nationalities, but so do socio-political issues and their relevance. To counter this problem, one communicator indicates that they either develop country-specific guidelines if the issue is of particular corporate relevance, or that they pursue a globally uniform brand identity. Regardless of the approach used, maintaining authenticity is the top priority for the interviewees. In sum, according to the respondents, the most important criteria influencing corporate positioning are authenticity, credibility, employer branding, impact on society, and the urgency of the issue.

However, the communicators do not decide for or against a positioning solely on the basis of these criteria. When deciding on a corporate positioning, the interviewees state to always weigh the possible opportunities and risks of positioning their company on socio-political issues. Most frequently, the respondents mention that corporate positioning bears the opportunity for social acceptance of their company, followed by reputation and image gains. By this, they hope to increase the attractiveness and reputation of their company in society and create long-term resilience among the public.

Respondents also mention the possibility of potentially influencing politics as well as the opportunity for identity formation through positioning. Employer branding is not only a key criterion for the positioning decision but is also mentioned as having great potential for companies: Creating employee approval and identification with the company turns employees into representatives to the outside world. In addition, meeting customer expectations is cited as an opportunity that generates customer identification and thus loyalty to the company. Accordingly, the company benefits not only from this growing trust but also from increases in sales, as some communicators point out.

Along these opportunities, respondents consider potential risks of positioning before making a public statement. The most frequently mentioned risks were alienation of stakeholders, loss of reputation and credibility, risk of misperception of an issue and the unpredictability of reactions to positionings and the evolution of an issue in society. In terms of balancing the interests of (global) stakeholders, a misperception of corporate positioning could jeopardize supply and business relationships. Only a few respondents mentioned a lack of positioning or an approach that is too slow and cautious as a potential risk, in the sense that silence can generate just as much criticism. Almost all respondents agreed that socio-political statements entail risks, but that the opportunities outweigh them and that corporate positioning *“is living up to the responsibility that we bear as a company and that is sometimes associated with chances, sometimes the risks outweigh them – but that is not the criterion”*.

However, whether or not a company takes a stand depends to a large extent on how it deals with socio-political issues in general and the strategic orientation pursued by the company. Some communicators describe a reactive tactic, namely a fundamental refusal to participate in socio-political discussions. This happens when either the issue is not relevant to the company, is not consistent with the company's values and business, or the debate is perceived to be moving too fast.

Others mentioned an adaptive strategy. In this case, companies proceed according to the agenda-surfing principle and decide on a topic-specific basis whether or not to take a stance on an issue that is already being heavily discussed in the public discourse. Further, other communicators mention proactive tactics pursued by their companies. That is, when companies behave as social players who actively drive issues and help to shape social change, resulting in opportunities for the company. They see themselves as *pioneers* and pursue an agenda-setting strategy.

The Internal Planning Procedure of Positioning

The third research question examines how external positionings on socio-political issues are strategically planned. The strategic planning process starts with the identification of relevant issues. The companies surveyed report that in this process, either employees or the communications department may unintentionally become aware of relevant socio-political topics, or communicators may deliberately search for new important issues, sometimes with the help of tools or external service providers. As a third option, interviewees mentioned inquiries from outside, such as from NGOs, customers, press, or politics, as a way of becoming aware of issues.

In most cases of the companies interviewed, there is no set, uniform scheme for the further treatment of these identified relevant topics. Most of the interviewees emphasize that positioning is a matter of individual decision-making and that it is therefore not possible to make any general preliminary decisions or action plans. Only a few companies have emerging strategic approaches such as lists of topics on which they should or should not take a stance. Some of the respondents stated that they already integrate predictable topics into their annual planning and therefore practice agenda-setting. Others deliberately leave room in their annual planning for unanticipated topics they might encounter and therefore practice a more reactive agenda-surfing strategy. A third group of companies states that they do not strategically integrate their positioning into their annual planning at all.

If a strategic planning process exists, it is very similar to Lütgens' (2015, pp. 781–787) issues management process and includes the following steps: Discussion of positioning decision, formulation of messages, selection of communication channels, and evaluation. Only a few companies have further emerging approaches of strategic planning: One respondent indicates that they have prepared statements on issues addressing fundamental corporate values, some other companies are forming special teams responsible for socio-political issues, and in some companies, rapid response procedures are developing. The decision-making authority on whether to take a stance often lies with the top management: Depending on the topic, the head of communications may also decide on a positioning decision. In addition, it depends on the topic and situation in which the company speaks out. Regarding the planning process, the interviewees also emphasize the aspect of time pressure, as positioning decisions often have to be made promptly. Another major challenge is that there are only few benchmarks for orientation and a general lack of resources. Since positioning decisions are often subject- and situation-dependent, the strategic planning process has so far been dominated by “*trial and error*”, as described by one respondent.

Overall, from the interviews conducted it can be observed that there are still no overarching patterns of strategic planning, no uniform departments, and no general job-positions for socio-political positioning. Most companies stated that positionings are individual decisions and are so far not strategically planned. This clearly contrasts with the urgency and the risks of the topic previously described by many companies but might be caused by the novelty of the field and the different priorities that companies assign to issues.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how the perceived pressure to take a stand on socio-political issues affects the external corporate communication of internationally operating German B2C companies.

The findings of this study fundamentally show that companies today affirm the existence of positioning pressure. Additionally, the attitude that positioning is correct and important prevails. But according to the respondents, it is not (yet) possible to speak of strategic planning for positioning on socio-political issues. The companies show very heterogeneous responding approaches to emerging issues. Dealing with socio-political topics has not yet been professionalized. It can be assumed, that this is related to the novelty of the field of CSA. Therefore, the guiding research question cannot be answered uniformly for all companies involved in this study. As outlined in the findings the companies follow three different strategic orientations. Those approaches can be drawn back to Lütgens' (2015) issues management process (p. 789). By deliberately disregarding an issue, a company acts reactively; an independent anticipation of the issue by a company is equivalent to an adaptive strategic response and a proactive approach to an issue means a company endeavors to actively shape the issue by unilaterally influencing it in its interest (Lütgens, 2015, p. 789).

Considering the strategic decisions about the treatment of issues described in theory, the corporate behavior in dealing with socio-political issues of the companies analyzed can be divided into three patterns based on the statements of the interviewees. The findings show similarities in perceiving positioning pressure, observing, or initiating current debates and deciding on taking a stance on socio-political issues, which allows the classification of the companies analyzed into *skeptics*, *adapters*, and *pioneers*.

The *skeptics*, to which two of the companies studied were assigned, behave reactively, and take little or no stance on socio-political issues. In one of the two companies, pressure from society, the competition, and NGOs is perceived. Albeit the communicator reported that this does not lead the

company to take a public position on the issues in question. Rather, the general attitude of avoiding risks and the goal of not providing a target for attacks often leads the company to not take a stand. Exceptions are made if issues are raised through direct inquiries, but only in terms of neutral statements which do not communicate an attitude too explicitly. This was justified by not having sufficient expertise to make well-founded public statements on socio-political issues. The second company that fits this pattern stands out in the sample. The respondent stated to not feel any corporate responsibility to speak out on socio-political issues if they do not concern the target audience. This company does not perceive any pressure to position itself, nor does it see any need for action to take a stand on socio-political issues. It can be assumed, that these companies do not perceive themselves as active members of the social discourse, yet, and therefore do not see the necessity of following moral and social expectations in order to generate their SLO in the first place.

The *adapters* alternate between a reactive and adaptive approach of dealing with socio-political issues. They generally observe public debates actively but decide on an issue-specific basis whether to take a position or not. This approach can be described as agenda-surfing. *Adapters* perceive positioning pressure from a broad spectrum of different stakeholders, especially from general societal expectations and customers. They see public stances on socio-political issues and debates as a chance to utilize opportunities. However, the extent to which the values of companies play a major role in relation to their economic interests remains to be questioned. Consequently, for this pattern, it can be summarized that the perceived positioning pressure on issues is only partly driving the analyzed companies to communicate their attitudes externally. Albeit value and attitude communication depend on the issue in question. It can be assumed that the corporations belonging to this type do consider themselves as active members of society and know that a corporate positioning can help maintain their SLO. Since the field of CSA is not yet fully established in companies, however, they still seem to be in the process of learning how to handle such issues in the best interest of their company and society.

The *pioneers* have an attenuated perception of pressure in comparison to the *adapters*. Explanations could be the lack of competition in the German market – as is the case for two companies – or the position in the top third of the 120 top-selling companies and hence having become accustomed to positioning pressure already. It could also be because these companies have such a high profile that they can act more confidently than smaller, less well-known companies without risking the loss of their SLO. The perception of pressure alone does not determine the positioning decisions for these

companies; instead, the *pioneers* attribute themselves a social responsibility because they consider themselves an active part of society, which is why they are among the first to take up issues and speak out about it. The initiation of public debates can be understood as an attempt of agenda-setting. Some even stated to make use of the possibility to influence politics and/or society.

Two of the companies analyzed cannot be classified into the three patterns and thus form special cases: Within the structure of a holding company the diversified subsidiaries are perceived as separate businesses by the public. Therefore, positioning activities of the holding company would not benefit the overall business. In this case, some of the subsidiaries do at times take a stance, but the holding company refrains significantly from positioning itself. The second special case is a family-run company which – on the instructions of the family – generally tends to keep a low profile when it comes to positioning itself on socio-political issues. It can be assumed that this is due to the importance of family values when it comes to the renewal and maintenance of their SLO. However, for issues that are particularly relevant to this company, such as equal rights for men and women, active positioning and consistency across the various international markets was reported. An overview of the clustering into corporate behavioral patterns of the interviewed companies can be found in table 2:

Table 2.
Interview partners clustered according to corporate behavioral patterns.

| Skeptics | Adapters | Pioneers | Others |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Technology, 10.000* | Automotive, 225.000 | Telecommunication, 100.000 | Media, 20.000 |
| Food, 5.000 | Automotive, 155.000 | Automotive, 50.000 | Retail, 5.000 |
| | Conglomerate, 60.000 | Pharmacy, 40.000 | |
| | Automotive, 30.000 | Retail, 15.000 | |
| | Pharmacy, 35.000 | Mobility, 15.000 | |
| | Retail, 20.000 | | |
| | Energy Supply, 20.000 | | |

Conglomerate,
15.000

Food,
10.000

Food,
10.000

*Annual Revenue (in hundred Mil. €).

When the patterns emerged from the sample initial assumptions were made about correlations of features of the companies analyzed. But contrary to those assumptions, no direct correlations could be derived between the following characteristics and the patterns identified: The industry is not decisive for a consistent approach to positioning pressure; for example, some of the automotive manufacturers studied are among the *pioneers*, while others are among the *adaptors*. Nor can the patterns be clearly mapped according to a company's sales figures. Here, it must be considered that all the companies in the sample are among the 120 top-selling companies in Germany, but it seemed reasonable to assume that within this sample companies with higher sales and consequently more customer contact could be among the *pioneers*. Brand awareness also does not seem to have any influence on whether a company is classified as a pioneer, adapter, or skeptic. Initial assumptions about the logic behind the patterns suggested that companies with higher brand awareness could generally be among the *pioneers*, since they are active in larger public arenas. However, this assumption has not been confirmed either. An explanation could be that the field of socio-political positioning and CSA is fairly new, and the companies are still in a discovery phase, which is why no clear associations can be identified for now. Further, the companies interviewed have different structures and perceive issues in different ways – Lütgens' (2015) issues management process is a model that exemplarily outlines how companies deal with issues but is not applied uniformly in all companies.

Regardless of which pattern the companies analyzed were assigned to, it is apparent that none of them have a clear CSA strategy. Only two respondents reported the beginnings of schemes to deal with socio-political issues. This can be reasoned by the process of becoming aware of the new role as an active player with socio-political responsibility and the need to further negotiate how to face this role in order to maintain their SLO. It is also interesting that although many of the communicators stated attitude communication should be selective about topics, most of them do not have a strategy for determining these topics. This could be because CSA is only beginning to

be perceived in corporate communications and in academia and has yet to gain acceptance alongside the almost ubiquitous principle of CSR.

Overall, the perceived positioning pressure not only leads companies to take a public stance, but also influences the following points of corporate communication: The communicators surveyed are becoming more aware of the entire issue of attitude communication. This in turn, could lead to a rethinking and change of internal processes integrating CSA into the daily business of communication departments. Because nearly all respondents stated that socio-political positioning is important, it can be assumed that such debates could be more strongly included into external corporate communications in the future. Furthermore, it was noticed that in the case of attitude communication, a differentiation between external and internal communication can be diffuse since external corporate communication also reaches employees. This again illustrates the importance of involving employees in a positioning decision to ensure their identification with the company. Additionally, globalization, mediatization, and polarization strongly influence positioning decisions, especially with regard to the positioning of internationally operating companies in different markets. As companies are more in the focus of media coverage than ever before, they are being put under increasing pressure to take a stance on socio-political issues.

In sum, it can be concluded that there are notable differences between the individual companies in dealing with socio-political issues, which suggest the emergence of the three patterns described. CSA is a young concept, not only in research but also in practice, which will continue to develop in the coming years and could gain in popularity. All companies analyzed are grappling with the extent to which they should include positioning on socio-political issues in their communications but generally acknowledge the relevance of CSA.

Besides the novelty of CSA and outlined struggles of the companies with their positioning decisions, this paper faces some limitations. When trying to clarify the influence of societal expectations on the positioning decision of companies, this methodological approach was an appropriate method for investigating the research interest. Nevertheless, conducting guided interviews consequently bears the limitations of social desirability, reactivity, and interviewer effects (Brosius et al., 2016, pp. 127–128), which can influence the results. Further, interviews have the weakness that respondents only report what they actively remember or what is in their recent past. In addition, interviews with communicators at different positions limit the comparability of the answers given, since sometimes they are unable to give substantiated answers as the specific task lies outside their area of responsibility or because they enjoy different decision-making power. Respondents tend to

answer deliberately, as the topic of positioning decisions on socio-political issues carries the potential risk of negative repercussions for companies, despite the signed confidentiality agreement. Aiming at reliable and valid data, with six researchers working on this project, complete intercoder agreement cannot be granted as subjectivity cannot fully be eliminated during the coding process. By using a codebook, the research team sufficiently counteracted these subjectivity issues.

Following on from this paper, possible future research can be devoted to quantitatively verify the patterns shown and to gain insights into how the perception and influence of pressure differs between large, medium-sized, and smaller companies. In addition, the question arises if increasing societal pressure can possibly shape the job descriptions of communicators in the future and whether new internal processes and additional qualifications will be required to ensure ideal corporate positioning. For the future, therefore, a more intensive corporate engagement with the topic of positioning on socio-political issues and a professionalization of attitude communication are foreseeable, as companies will become more aware of their responsibility and their new role as active socio-political players.

Conclusion

This study shows that the companies surveyed not only perceive the pressure to position themselves differently, but that this pressure also influences their external communication as well as their international orientation and strategic planning otherwise. According to the interviews conducted, it was possible to define initial patterns for the influence of societal expectations towards companies and their positioning on socio-political issues: *pioneers*, *adaptors*, and *skeptics*. Although these patterns can be identified for the companies in this sample, it remains open whether and to what extent these will form established approaches of how to deal with social pressure towards corporate positioning on socio-political issues in the future. Therefore, this paper proposes great potential for further research on this specific topic.

As explained, only patterns, and no clear typologies, can be identified in the way companies deal with the positioning pressure they face. It can be assumed that companies must first learn how to deal with this newly perceived pressure, societal expectations and the emerging field of CSA. As a result of these increasing social expectations, companies are being called upon to take an active stance on socio-political issues in public and to participate in related discourses. In doing so, they are challenged to rethink their actions as they operate in an area of tension: they must take positions that are in line with corporate values, maintain their SLO through social responsibility, and at the same time ensure their profitability. To meet these demands, it is

inevitable to take a stance on socio-political issues, but, as Thomas Koch (2021) points out, it takes courage to take a stance.

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